



# **School Council President**

**Improving School Governance**

Published by Schools and Regional Services  
Department of Education and Training  
Melbourne  
February 2020

© State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) 2020



Improving School Governance is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence. You are free to re-use the work under that licence, on the condition that you credit the State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training), indicate if changes were made and comply with the other licence terms, see: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

The licence does not apply to: any images, photographs, trademarks or branding, including the Victorian Government logo and the DET logo; and content supplied by third parties.

Authorised by the Department of Education and Training  
2 Treasury Place, East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002.

Copyright queries may be directed to the Knowledge Management Unit at  
[copyright@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:copyright@edumail.vic.gov.au)

An educational institution situated in Australia, which is not conducted for profit, or a body responsible for administering such an institution may copy and communicate the materials, other than third party materials, for the educational purposes of the institution.

Authorised by the Department of Education and Training  
2 Treasury Place, East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002.  
ISBN 978-0-646-81427-8



Education  
and Training

# 5

## Contents

<b>5.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>	Who presides at a meeting .....	20
Goal .....	4	Decision-making .....	21
Overview .....	4	Setting the agenda .....	22
<b>5.1 Roles and responsibilities .....</b>	<b>5</b>	Chairing the meeting.....	23
Why is this topic important?.....	5	Stages of the meeting .....	23
The effective president.....	6	Minutes of the meeting.....	24
Code of Conduct.....	6	Managing conflict and	
Public Sector Values.....	7	the conduct of meetings .....	25
Role of the president.....	8		
Building relationships.....	11	<b>5.4 Engaging the school community</b>	
<b>5.2 Characteristics of an effective</b>		<b>and beyond .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>school council .....</b>	<b>13</b>	Why is this topic important?.....	26
Why is this topic important?.....	13	Sharing information	
The importance		and duty of confidentiality .....	27
of good governance .....	13	The president as spokesperson ..	29
What makes a school council		Consultation with	
effective.....	14	the community .....	30
Roles of school council members...	15	Engaging the community .....	31
Delegations.....	15	Addressing concerns	
Annual planning for		and complaints.....	31
school council business .....	16	Managing conflict on council.....	32
School council			
annual self-assessment.....	18	<b>Support to school councillors .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>5.3 How to run effective school</b>		<b>Resources and links.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>council meetings.....</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>Further information.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Why is this topic important?.....	19	<b>Handout A1 .....</b>	<b>34</b>
Features of an		<b>Handout B1 .....</b>	<b>36</b>
effective meeting .....	20		

# 5.0

## Introduction

### Goal

This module serves to provide school council presidents with a better understanding of:

- their roles and responsibilities as a school council president
- what makes a school council effective
- how to lead school council meetings
- how to engage the community in the school and its objectives.

### Overview

The school council president (president) is a Parent or Community member (not a Department of Education and Training employee member) of school council, who presides over, or chairs, school council meetings. The president is elected annually by all school council members, usually at the first school council meeting after the annual school council elections.

The president must be able to run effective meetings, work effectively with all council members and with the principal, with the aim of playing a leadership role on the council, which sets the broad direction and vision of the school.

An effective president is a key component of a cohesive and effective school council. The president needs to understand the responsibilities of the role and the overall governance structure of government schools. This governance structure consists of the Minister for Education, the Department of Education and Training (DET), school councils and teaching staff, including the principal. The president should also have a constructive working relationship with the principal, other school councillors and the community.

Being president is an important and prestigious responsibility. The president represents the school in the wider community and must be prepared to champion the school, its students and its staff. The role can be time-consuming but very rewarding.

This training module will help those people elected president of their school's council and those aspiring to the role of president to understand the nature and extent of the role and to develop the skills and knowledge to perform their responsibilities successfully.

# 5.1

## Roles and responsibilities

### Why is this topic important?

All school council members should know and understand their roles and responsibilities, and the functions and objectives of the council, particularly the president.

The president, with the principal, provides leadership, establishing the environment in which the council can operate effectively.

**On completing this unit, the participant should be able to:**

- understand the skills required of an effective president
- understand the roles and responsibilities of a president.

# The effective president

## The role of president require leadership and management skills.

An effective president is decisive, fair, open-minded, task-focused, consultative, respects the views of others and is aware of the big picture. A good president knows the boundary of their authority and the authority of the school council as a whole, understands and respects privacy and confidentiality obligations and knows how and when to delegate.

A good president is available to the school community and to the other members of school council when needed. The president should have a strong and successful working relationship with the principal, and maintain the continued support of all school council members.

Before nominating for president, a candidate should consider what skills and experience they could bring to the position. Do they have an understanding of the school and school council, including the school's direction and needs, or the time and willingness to learn this? Do they have the patience and commitment to develop good working relationships? Are they prepared to be a role model in the school community for professionalism, integrity and sound judgement?

## Code of Conduct

School councils in Victoria are public entities as defined by the *Public Administration Act 2004*. School councillors are directors of public entities and must abide by the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities (Code of Conduct) issued by the Victorian Public Sector Commission. The Code of Conduct sets the standard of behaviour and requires all councillors to:

- **act with honesty and integrity** – be truthful, open and clear about their motives and declare any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest and duty
- **act in good faith in the best interests of the school** – work cooperatively with other councillors and the school community, be reasonable, and make all decisions with the best interests of students in mind
- **act fairly and impartially** – consider all relevant facts of an issue before making a decision, seek to have a balanced view, never give special treatment to a person or group and do not act from self-interest
- **use information appropriately** – respect confidentiality and use information for the purpose for which it was made available
- **use their position appropriately** – not use their position as a councillor to gain an advantage
- **act in a financially responsible manner** – observe all the above principles when making financial decisions
- **exercise due care, diligence and skill** – accept responsibility for decisions and do what is best for the school
- **act consistently with legislative and policy requirements when making decisions**
- **notify the school council if they become a candidate for an election in any state, local or federal election** and not use the council's resources in connection with their candidature
- **demonstrate leadership and stewardship** – set a good example, encourage a culture of accountability and child safety, manage risks effectively and responsibility to keep the school strong and sustainable.

## Public Sector Values

School councillors must also abide by and demonstrate the Victorian Public Sector Values set out in the Code of Conduct. These values are Responsiveness, Integrity, Impartiality, Accountability, Respect, Leadership and Human Rights.

The Values underpin the behaviours that the government and community expect of all directors of public entities, including school council members.

The Values set out the way that school councillors, as directors of public entities, should think and act. These behaviours increase trust and confidence in our work. The public expect employees and school council members to act in accordance with the Values. Doing so is central to building and sustaining trust in the important work we do.

When school council members act in accordance with the Code of Conduct and the Values, it strengthens the school's capacity to operate effectively and achieve its objectives.

The Values have been adopted by the Department as the DET Values and complement each school's values and teachers' professional standards, such as the Codes of Conduct and Ethics issued by the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

For all school staff and school council members, behaving with integrity and respect in everyday decisions and actions goes to the heart of the community's trust in the school and the public education system.

## Role of the president

The president has a strategic role to play in representing the vision, mission and purpose of the school.

As the chair of school council meetings, the president ensures relevant matters are discussed openly and that there is full participation of all school councillors at meetings. Collaborative discussions will lead to more effective and efficient decision making.

**The president's duties include:**

- developing and working with the community towards a shared vision for the school
- actively participating in the core review panel in the school's four-year review cycle
- endorsing key school planning and reporting documents on behalf of the council
- being an effective spokesperson and advocate for the school council
- chairing meetings of school council
- representing the school council in public forums with the principal
- promoting the school and its principal to the community.

Following the election of the president and other office-bearers, the principal will inform the school community and the Department of the names of the school council members and office-bearers. The president will be provided with an eduMail email address to receive regular communications from the Department and should speak to the principal, who is responsible for setting up this account.

It is expected the president will access this account each week to be informed of Department communications, especially those relevant to school council business. Relevant information should be provided to other school council members by the president. This account will also be used to access the Strategic Planning Online Tool (SPOT). This is important for endorsement of the School Strategic Plan, Annual Implementation Plan and Annual Report.



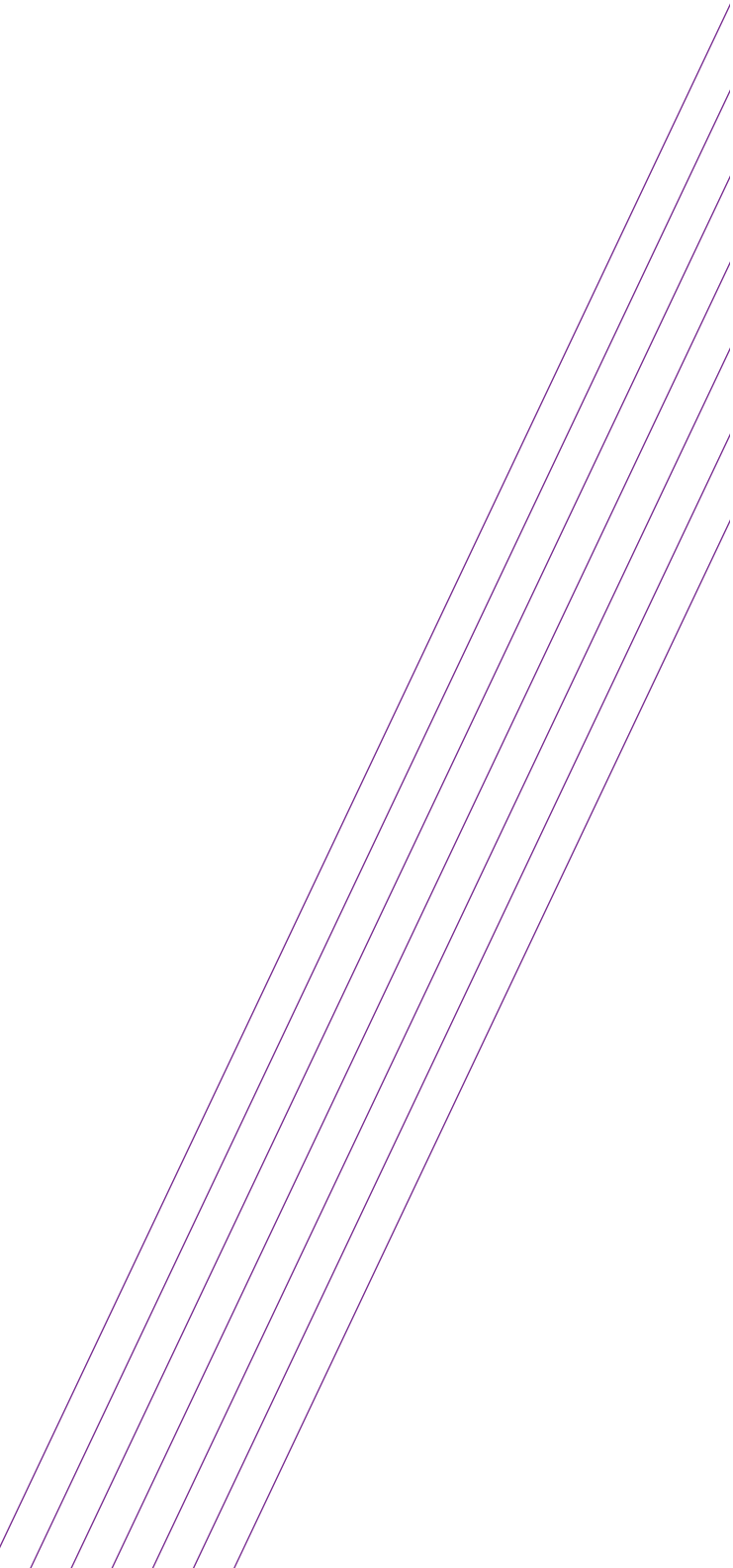
The president and the principal have distinct responsibilities as outlined below.

#### The principal ...

- provides school council with timely advice about educational and other matters
- prepares the council's agenda in consultation with the president
- reports regularly to school council about the school's performance against School Strategic Plan
- ensures school council decisions are acted on
- provides adequate support and resources for the conduct of school council meetings
- ensures the vice-president or a non-DET member of the council presides at a council meeting, in the absence of the president
- communicates with the president about school council business
- ensures that new school council members are inducted
- ensures that the school council president's details are recorded against the school council president eduMail account
- provides the president with information on how to access the eduMail account.

#### The school council president ...

- chairs council meetings in an effective and efficient way
- ensures everyone has a say in meetings and decisions are understood and recorded
- is a signatory to school council contracts, the School Strategic Plan, school council delegations and financial accounts and statements
- participates in the four-year school review as an active member of the core review panel
- endorses the school Pre-review Self-evaluation, terms of reference for school review, the school Annual Implementation Plan and Annual Report, and communicates the Plan and Report to the school community
- attests to school compliance with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) registration requirements and the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* to the extent that they are within the scope and powers and functions of school council
- presides at the annual public reporting meeting
- ensures school council and council members remain focused on improving student outcomes
- with the principal, is school council's spokesperson and official representative on public occasions
- casts a second and casting vote when school council votes are tied
- accesses email communications each week from the Department through the president's eduMail account, and communicates relevant information to school council members
- provides his or her details for the school registration process
- witnesses the affixing of school's common seal on relevant documentation.



School council is generally also involved in the school principal selection process. When principal selection occurs, a panel is formed to review applications, interview shortlisted applicants and recommend one or more applicants to the Secretary of the Department to employ.

The selection panel includes councillors, Department staff and regional office personnel. The school council president, or his or her nominee, is a member of the principal selection panel. The president is appointed by the school council, to represent the council. Principal selection panel members are provided with principal selection panel training.

The school council president, on request from the Regional Director, provides input to principal contract renewal discussions. The president advises the school council of that input at the next school council meeting.

## Building relationships

The president needs to build strong working relationships with the principal, other school councillors and the school community. The president and the principal support each other in their respective roles.

To build the relationship with the **principal**, the **president** can:

- upon being elected, meet the principal to discuss key aspects of school council business
- develop a shared understanding of the school's direction and its priorities, as stated in the School Strategic Plan
- arrange to meet the principal on a regular basis ahead of every school council meeting to discuss the agenda, issues to be tabled and any background information that needs to be circulated
- keep up to date with school matters that may affect school council and the community
- inform the principal of community matters that may be relevant to the school
- introduce the principal to key members of the school community as necessary, particularly if the principal is new to the school
- be available if the principal needs to discuss matters relevant to the school
- understand the role of the principal and those matters of the school that are operational and therefore not the responsibility of the school council
- respect the privacy and confidentiality obligations of school council matters.

To build relationships with **school councillors**, the **president** can:

- be a good listener and ensure all school councillors have the opportunity to be heard
- be willing to meet individual school councillors to understand their particular perspectives
- welcome and encourage new school councillors to be active participants at meetings
- delegate and share council tasks between members as appropriate.

The **president** can build relationships with the **wider school community** by:

- attending school events such as music concerts, art exhibitions and athletic sports and speaking with staff, students and families
- considering meeting local government officers and the local Member of Parliament, with the principal.

New school councillors are briefed on existing school issues and processes. The principal will provide new school councillors with a background information package, which may include:

- Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities
- School Strategic Plan
- Annual Implementation Plan
- Annual Report to the school community
- school council Standing Orders (if any)
- information about the Department's Values and ethical decision-making
- current school policies and whole of Department policies applying to schools or where to access them
- sample agenda
- list of common education acronyms
- council members phone numbers and email addresses with consent of the members
- folder or binder in which to file council paperwork
- details of training and support available from the Department.



## 5.2

# Characteristics of an effective school council

## Why is this topic important?

A strong, united school council with a clear vision and a willingness to contribute positively is a feature of a successful school.

On completing this unit, the participant should be able to:

- understand what makes a school council successful
- understand the role the president plays in an effective school council.

## The importance of good governance

Good governance enables the school council to perform efficiently and effectively and to respond strategically to changing demands and educational challenges.

Good governance relies on the professional leadership of the principal, the president and individual school council members and is supported by effective meeting and decision making procedures.

Effective school councils are characterised by a mutual and respectful sharing of information, knowledge and ideas. There is a focus on open communication where all members are able to exchange information, share experiences, express different perspectives, pose questions, clarify viewpoints, explore relevant research and develop a shared vision and way forward. Good governance also involves ensuring decisions are made and implemented appropriately.

## What makes a school council effective

**An effective school council is one that:**

- focuses on improving student learning outcomes and educational opportunities from a governance perspective
- involves the community in conversations about key educational issues and challenges
- is actively involved in the development of the School Strategic Plan
- promotes meaningful parent and community participation and actively seeks the views of its community
- has a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities
- includes members who represent the diverse views of the school community
- has a clear and consistent process for decision-making
- maintains high ethical standards
- has members with trust and respect for one another
- evaluates and communicates with the school community about its activities
- regularly reviews and evaluates its own performance
- appropriately delegates to individual members and subcommittees
- devotes time to its own growth and development, through induction and training.

An effective school council should support the development of strategic partnerships to assist the school achieve the goals in the School Strategic Plan. For example, school council members should consider and discuss opportunities to work with organisations outside the school in areas such as fundraising and facilities development.

The Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 set out certain legal requirements in relation to the operation of school council meetings. These requirements cannot be overridden by the Standing Orders determined by a school council. See the Governance module for a list of these legal requirements.

It is good practice for a school council to establish Standing Orders to assist the council to operate effectively and efficiently. Standing Orders should be reviewed each year following completion of the election process. In addition to the legal requirements, school councils are encouraged to provide additional guidelines, which might cover agendas, meeting etiquette and length of meetings.

## Roles of school council members Delegations

**It is the responsibility of the principal and the president to ensure school council members understand their role.**

There is no legal requirement for a school council to have a vice-president, but many do. The vice-president will chair meetings when the president is absent. The vice-president must not be a Department employee.

It is recommended that a school council elect a treasurer who is not an employee of the Department.

**All school council members have a responsibility to:**

- come prepared and ready to contribute at school council meetings
- attend school events and seek to understand the school's operations
- support the president and the principal
- actively promote the school to the community
- comply with the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities and behavioural expectations set out in the Department's Values.

The Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 allow school councils to delegate their powers and duties, however a school council cannot delegate any of its functions or powers in relation to the approval of the school budget or Annual Report.

There are a number of powers or functions a council may delegate to the principal, usually from the beginning of a school year, to assist in the efficient running of the school. A school council must generally obtain approval from the Minister for Education to delegate a power or duty to a person or body other than the principal.

The delegation must be recorded in the minutes of the meeting of school council and a register of delegations must be kept by the school council. A delegations fact sheet and template are located on the Department's website. The delegation document must be signed by the president of the school council and delivered to the delegate/s (usually the principal).

A written report about any activities performed by a delegate, is presented at each ordinary meeting of the school council.

## Annual planning for school council business

Just as schools benefit from strategic and annual planning, so too do school councils.

The school council president can take a leadership role in planning the school council business for the year ahead. This begins with discussing school priorities with the principal and new council, following annual elections and appointment of office bearers.

From the discussion, an annual work plan can be developed, a month-by-month schedule of the business of council for that year. The schedule may include:

- known tasks that are required to be completed each year, such as the endorsement of the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) in the Strategic Planning Online Tool (SPOT)
- endorsement of the Annual Report by 30 April and presentation of the Annual Report to the school community at the annual public reporting meeting
- significant events including reviews or the development of the School Strategic Plan (SSP)
- a schedule of policies due for review and a timeline that allows for community consultation and additional research if required
- discussion and completion of the school council self-assessment tool annually, which can guide the identification of strengths and opportunities for support, development and training for councillors
- discussion and consideration of the Skills and Expertise Guide, with respect to recruitment and development of the council.



**Additional features of an effective school council are included in the table below:**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Detail</b>
<b>An effective school council works together</b>	The school council should be seen by all school council members as being greater than the sum of the individuals of which it is comprised. Discussions may be lively, however the council's decision overrides individual opinion.
<b>Members set aside their own special interests</b>	Members add value through personal skills and experience, but must be prepared to set personal interests aside for the good of the overall situation and to prevent any potential, perceived or actual, pecuniary or non-pecuniary conflicts of interest.
<b>School council offers strong support to the principal and school</b>	School council members should ask searching questions and provide relevant, constructive criticism; however they should avoid sharing negative opinions outside of school council meetings and gossip.
<b>School council stays focused on its objectives and functions</b>	School council members understand their responsibilities, as distinct from those of the principal, the teaching staff and the Department.
<b>School council is led by a strong president</b>	School council elects a strong and capable individual to be its president, one who will have the respect of and who respects, the principal, the council and the community.
<b>An effective school council thinks strategically</b>	School council decisions and actions reflect and support the future directions of the school.
<b>Real discussions are followed by real decisions</b>	School council members attend meetings, having prepared carefully and are ready to contribute. Differences are left at the discussion table and decisions are acted upon promptly.
<b>School council builds trust in its community</b>	School council develops and maintains a record of trust through its responsible actions and good communication.

## School council annual self-assessment

Self-assessments are an important process for reflecting on school council effectiveness and are a requirement for all councils under the *Public Administration Act 2004*.

School council members will operate effectively when they have a clear understanding of governance roles, responsibilities and a clear and consistent process for decision-making. The school council president can take a leadership role in leading council to review and reflect on their effectiveness as a group. The annual self-assessment process will identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.

A school council self-assessment tool has been designed by the Department of Education and Training to assist school council presidents, principals and all council members to reflect on their roles and the effectiveness of the school council as a whole. The council as a group, can undertake the annual self-assessment, then discuss the results in small groups or as a whole team and develop an improvement plan.

Most school councils will identify some areas of focus. For example, they may agree that some council operational practices could be refined or improved or they may wish to build particular knowledge and capabilities by undertaking training.

As a result of the annual self-assessment, councils may review and revise their Standing Orders, their subcommittees and the effectiveness of their meetings. It is important that school councils and individual councillors work collaboratively and with purpose.

The Department's self-assessment tool can be located on the Department's website.

## 5.3

# How to run effective school council meetings

### Why is this topic important?

Well-conducted meetings are critical to an effective and properly functioning school council. There must be at least eight meetings a year and at least one every term. The president, as the presiding officer or chair, is responsible for the conduct of the meetings.

At the end of this unit, participants should be able to:

- recognise the features of an effective meeting
- confidently chair successful school council meetings.

## Features of an effective meeting

Meetings are held to allow school council to make decisions related to its functions. Meeting dates should be set at the start of the year by the principal and the president to suit the school's calendar. They should not be scheduled at the same time as other important school events.

**Effective and accountable decision-making in meetings requires:**

- a clear definition of how the school council conducts its business, which could be outlined in Standing Orders
- a carefully prepared agenda
- papers relevant to specific agenda items circulated in advance
- all members preparing adequately for the meeting
- frank and open discussion
- accurate and timely records of decisions and meeting minutes
- the ability and willingness to seek independent and external professional advice when necessary
- a subcommittee structure or working groups that meet regularly to support and enable the work of school council.

### Who presides at a meeting

The school council president must preside at school council meetings. If the president is unable to preside, the meeting must be conducted in the following manner:

- if a vice-president has been appointed by the school council, the vice-president must preside at the meeting if available
- if the school council has not appointed a vice-president, or the vice-president is unable to preside, the school council must decide on a member of the council, other than an employee of the Department, to preside.

**A Department employee, including the principal, is ineligible to be school council president or chair a school council meeting.**

## Decision-making

School council decisions are made by a majority of the members eligible to vote and present at the meeting, provided the majority are non-Department employees and not less than one half of the members currently holding office are present. This represents a quorum, which must be in place for each school council meeting.

All decisions of school council are voted upon. The numbers for and against should be recorded in the minutes. The principal is a voting member. Where votes are tied, the presiding member has a second and casting vote.

All motions must be recorded. The motion mover and seconder, and the outcome must be minuted.

There is no provision for proxies to vote on school council matters at a meeting. However, a school councillor may be present, and therefore vote, at a meeting by video conferencing or teleconferencing.



## Setting the agenda

The principal, in consultation with the president, should set the council meeting agenda with enough time to distribute it to all members prior to the school council, along with meeting papers, which may include any reports or background material.

As executive officer of school council, it is the principal's responsibility to ensure school council members are suitably resourced and supported to adequately participate at school council meetings.

The agenda lists business that council will discuss during the meeting.

**A simple agenda may include:**

- welcome and apologies
- minutes of the previous meeting (voted upon)
- business arising from the minutes
- principal's report
- reports from subcommittees including finance subcommittee
- general business
- correspondence (incoming and outgoing)
- close.

If a school council does not have subcommittees, the principal may introduce the finance and other reports.

Usually, principals ask members to submit items for general business ahead of the meeting so they can be included on the agenda. It is for the president to determine if other general business matters raised at the meeting, that are within a function of the school council, will be discussed. There may not be sufficient time for the discussion. The president should decline to discuss any matters unrelated to a function of the school council.

**When discussing the proposed next meeting agenda with the principal, the president should ask:**

- Does the item fit within a function of the school council?
- Is the item operational (and thus a responsibility of the principal)?
- Should the item be dealt with elsewhere?
- Does the item warrant school council's time?

## Chairing the meeting

As chair, the president should open the meeting on time and call council members to order. To ensure an effective meeting, the president should:

- have a good understanding of the constituting Order of the council, the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities and the Standing Orders of council (if any)
- have sought a briefing with the principal ahead of the meeting on any complex or sensitive issues
- manage the discussions during the meetings to ensure business is expeditiously addressed. For this to occur, the chair needs to understand the powers of the chair and be willing to use them judiciously to ensure that debate and discussions are focussed and to the point. Presidents have the authority to bring discussions to a conclusion and bring on a vote when they feel all members who have a view have had the opportunity to present their view
- ensure that no school councillor dominates a discussion and encourage all councillors to express an opinion
- before calling for a vote, summarise points made in the discussion objectively and impartially
- be prepared to delegate contentious or complicated matters to individuals or subcommittees for more research or discussion
- keep an eye on the scheduled closing time of the meeting and try to pace the discussion to complete the business by that time
- call for a specified extension of time if that is required
- ensure that councillors know the date, time and venue of the next meeting before officially declaring the current meeting closed
- ensure that the decisions of the council are correctly recorded. When council approves the minutes, the chair presiding at that meeting signs the minutes.

## Stages of the meeting

School council meetings should follow a consistent format. An agenda should be prepared and distributed, together with draft minutes from the previous meeting and any reports from the principal, president, finance or other subcommittees, to council members no less than five business days before the meeting.

## Minutes of the meeting

Accurate minutes should be made of every meeting of school council, and of its subcommittees.

Minutes form a record of the council's activities and decisions and actions that need to be taken.

School councils should appoint a minute-taker at the beginning of each year. If this person is not a member of school council, they must act as a silent observer without voting rights. It is expected the minute-taker maintains confidentiality of meeting discussions.

When school council minutes are submitted for confirmation, only questions regarding their accuracy are to be raised. The chair of that meeting must sign the minutes once council has accepted them as being a true and accurate record of the meeting.

The minutes should be sent to the principal and president as soon as possible after a meeting for comment, and then distributed, by the principal, to all members of school council before the next school council meeting, where they are considered and confirmed.

The school council should keep the community informed about its operations by publishing a report following each meeting in the school newsletter and/or on the school website.

A person does not have a right to access the minutes of a school council meeting or other documents or records of a school council under the *Freedom of Information Act 2000*.



## Managing conflict and the conduct of meetings

At times, some school councils may experience members expressing strong conflicting views. There may be occasions where individual members are not working cooperatively with other school councillors. It is the president's responsibility, as chairperson, to manage any conflict or conduct issues that arise during the course of a meeting.

The principal is responsible for managing any matters that extend beyond the meeting.

Some strategies for the chairperson dealing with difficult situations include:

- dealing respectfully with all comments and contributions
- using clearly understood protocols to ensure all views are represented
- stopping one individual dominating the meeting
- bringing the discussion back to school council's core objectives, which include: assisting in the efficient governance of the school; ensuring that decisions affecting students of the school are made in students' best interests; enhancing the educational opportunities of students of the school; and ensuring the school and the school council complies with its legal obligations
- delegating the discussion to a subcommittee, or to a future school council meeting
- anticipating matters that might result in conflict between members and introducing them in a way which seeks to minimise tension
- being prepared to let an aggrieved member express their view, but then being prepared to close the debate
- reminding members of their obligations under the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities
- not taking sides and treating an individual's grievance as legitimate.

The president should be mindful of school council members acting contrary to the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities, which includes the Public Sector Values, or speaking against council decisions to members of the community, as this may bring the council or its decisions into disrepute. The principal and the president may need to meet the individual separately and remind them of their obligations under the Code of Conduct.

## 5.4

# Engaging the school community and beyond

### Why is this topic important?

The work of the school council needs to be known and understood by the school community, including families, students, staff and other stakeholders. If the community shares and has input into the vision and values of the school council, and has participated in the process, then the community is likely to offer greater support.

School council should establish effective mechanisms for communicating its decisions to the community, to enable consultation and to receive feedback.

**At the end of this unit, the participant will understand:**

- the importance of community consultation and engagement
- how to establish two-way communication with the school community.

## Sharing information and duty of confidentiality

School council members are drawn from the key stakeholders of the school: parents, staff, students and the wider community. Confidentiality and the proper use of information is an important component of the Code of Conduct for school councillors.

As individuals, council members bring diverse views to the council for working together to develop a shared vision for the improvement of student outcomes. School council decisions can affect the school and its stakeholders, and they generally need to be communicated to, and understood, by the community. This does not mean that the deliberations and different points of view expressed by individual council members should be communicated to the community. If council members are not confident that their views will be treated confidentially by other council members, they may not feel comfortable to express them, which is detrimental to the decision making process.

Council members must feel assured their discussions and views are treated confidentially by other members. All councillors will respect privacy and use their discretion and good judgement when dealing with school council information. For example: council members should not discuss who said what or what the different views of councillors may have outside of the council meeting. Private information from council meetings that could identify a staff member, student or their family must not be discussed, such as, information that could identify applicants in a principal selection process. The school council president and principal can provide guidance on any matter and the need for confidentiality, if required.

School councillors are expected to use the information they gain in the course of their council responsibilities for its intended purpose only. Members will use the information at council meetings to guide their discussions and decision-making. They will not use the information, including privileged or sensitive information, to obtain an advantage for themselves or another person or to cause concern or loss of the community's trust.

Minutes should be taken at every school council meeting and accepted by the council as a fair and accurate record. Although they serve as a record of all decisions they are not public documents, and are not subject to Freedom of Information laws.

The principal, as executive officer of the school council, should keep the community informed about the operations of the school council by publishing a report following each meeting.

There are various channels the principal can use to report to the community about the operations of the school council, including:

- the school website
- the school newsletter
- direct mail to families
- emails to families and students.

School councils should be wary of “word-of-mouth” communication or using third parties to broadcast decisions. At times, school council may consider the local media an appropriate channel for their news and information.

Another key opportunity for the community to be informed of the school council activities is at the public reporting meeting a council must hold at least once each year. At this meeting the school council reports on the proceedings of council since the date of the previous public meeting. The school council must present the Annual Report and, if council accounts have been audited, a copy of the audited accounts at the meeting.

Some school councils use this public meeting as a celebration and recognition of the school’s achievements as well as an acknowledgement of those who have contributed to the school over the previous year.

Interpreters and translators may need to be provided at these meetings to ensure that all families can understand the information being presented and engage in the discussions.

## The president as spokesperson

The president is spokesperson for the school council, and not the school. The principal has the dual responsibility to represent the school and the school council to the community.

The president should be prepared to explain school council policies, plans, priorities and activities. Some presidents, in consultation with the principal, write articles for the school newsletter to explain school council actions, or attend parent meetings.

**There are occasions when the president may be required to speak to the community, such as:**

- at information nights for prospective students and their families. The president may be called upon to explain the role of school council and its activities – and to seek expressions of interest from parents willing to join council
- at graduation ceremonies or major fundraising events. The president may take this opportunity to thank staff and families for their support of the school and the students
- at special ceremonies, such as the opening of new school buildings or the dedication of new facilities.

In this role, the president is a key asset for the school in engaging with the community.



## Consultation with the community

School council is required to gather information and consider the views of the school community for the purpose of making significant decisions related to the school and its students.

School council should be prepared to consult with the school community and, as needed, with the local community. There are some issues, such as the student dress code, on which the school community must be consulted.

However, consultation with the community does not mean the community makes the decision. School council seeks the opinion, advice and views of the community and then makes its decision.

**Consultation shows the community that:**

- opinions, ideas and contributions of others are valued
- the matters discussed are not always straightforward
- assistance is sought and welcomed
- people have different points of view about the best way forward.

Community forums or focus meetings or other mechanisms for providing feedback and ideas allow interested community members to contribute to the school council's decision-making.

In planning a forum or focus meeting, ensure all voices can be heard, and consider use of interpreters/translators and protocols for enabling all to participate.

**Other ways of consulting the community may include:**

- inviting specific individuals to a council meeting to provide information or expertise to assist the school council
- online surveys or requests for input, feedback or ideas via email.

Where school councils have subcommittees, or establishes working groups, members of the wider community should be invited to participate. This can be an excellent introduction to the work of the school council. Subcommittees make recommendations to council, so it is an opportunity for opinions and ideas to be heard. Subcommittees must have at least three members including at least one school council member.

School council meetings are normally open to the school community and conducted according to standard meeting requirements as described in the Standing Orders. Visitors or observers can be present at school council meetings with the agreement of the principal and a decision of council. Visitors have a right to speak but must do so through the person chairing the meeting (usually the president).

## Engaging the community

Consultation provides members of the school community with an opportunity to provide input into the decision-making process of school council. However, it can sometimes mean that only the vocal few have their ideas and opinions heard. On key issues, school council should seek direct input and engagement from its community in addition to consultation.

This approach to community engagement can be extended to the president and principal regularly conducting small invitee community forums.

The aim is to engage the community in school council work and to also reflect the school community's input through the decision-making process. The result of such actions is a greater belief and confidence by the community in its school council.

## Addressing concerns and complaints

A president is likely, from time to time, to receive a complaint about the school, either verbally or in writing.

**Depending on the nature of the complaint, the following steps can be taken:**

- if the complaint relates to a function of the school council, then the matter should be brought to the attention of the school council. Ask the complainant to put their concern in writing and address it to the school council. The complaint should be discussed at a council meeting. The principal as the executive officer should contact the complainant

advising how the matter has been or is proposed to be resolved

- if the matter relates to the operation of the school, for example, a complaint regarding a teacher, class structure, subject timetable, or similar, the complainant should be advised the matter is not a school council matter and should be directed to contact the principal to discuss their concerns. The principal would then manage the complaint. A written complaint should be noted on the council meeting agenda as incoming correspondence with no further action required from the council
- if the complaint is about the principal, the complainant should be advised to contact the regional office
- for complex complaints advice may be sought from the School Operations and Governance Unit or the relevant regional office. Contact details are provided under 'Support to school councillors'

Many complaints arise from miscommunication or lack of communication. A culture of respectful and appropriate communication from the school council may reduce complaints.

Some concerns raised by parents are complex; however in all cases an open, consistent approach that is courteous, efficient and fair best addresses parent concerns. Such an approach provides opportunities to build partnerships between schools and families.

When dealing with complaints, the principal and the president must ensure confidentiality and privacy of the matter.

The Department requires schools to develop a policy and procedure to address parent complaints. This policy should be developed by the principal in collaboration with parents and the school community and be consistent with the Department's parent complaints policy.



## Managing conflict on council

School councillors must abide by the Code of Conduct for Directors of Victorian Public Entities and work together in the best interests of the school, including:

- assisting in the efficient governance of the school
- ensuring that the council's decisions affecting students are made having regard to the best interests of the students
- enhancing the educational opportunities of students and
- ensuring the school council adheres to all legal and Department requirements.

The Managing School Council Conduct document provides information and advice on the Code of Conduct and managing conflict on council should it arise. In an environment where mutual trust and respect prevail, conflict can be a positive force. It can encourage people to find creative solutions, clarify an issue, increase the involvement of members, encourage growth, and strengthen relationships. However, conflict can divert energy from the group, compromise morale and create suspicion and disharmony.



## Support to school councillors

The School Operations and Governance Unit (SOGU) of Schools and Regional Services provides advice and guidance to school councils on a range of governance issues. Councillors can contact SOGU directly at [school.council@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:school.council@edumail.vic.gov.au) or **03 7022 1343** or **03 7022 1345** for information and advice.

Councillors can also contact their regional office for information and advice.

The Department offers comprehensive face to face training free of cost to school councils of Victorian Government schools. The training is based on four modules of the **Improving School Governance (ISG) materials; Governance, Strategic Planning, Finance and School Council President**. Face to face training is accessed by contacting the provider, Synergistiq on **03 9946 6801** or email Synergistiq: [sct@synergistiq.com](mailto:sct@synergistiq.com)

The ISG modules are also available online, on the Department's website.

### Resources and links

Further information, related policies and advice can be found on the Policy and Advisory Library (PAL) for schools on the Department of Education and Training website [education.vic.gov.au](http://education.vic.gov.au) including:

- School council – Conduct and Conflict of Interest
- School council – Liability and Legal proceedings
- School council – Meetings
- School council – Powers and Functions
- School council – Subcommittees
- School council – Training and Developing Good Governance

### Further information

Education and Training Reform Act 2006 on the Victorian Current Acts website [austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/eatra2006273](http://austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/vic/consol_act/eatra2006273)

Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 on the Department's website [education.vic.gov.au/about/department/legislation/Pages/act2006regs.aspx](http://education.vic.gov.au/about/department/legislation/Pages/act2006regs.aspx)

School Policy Templates Portal – Login required [edugate.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edrms/keyprocess/cp/Pages/home.aspx](http://edugate.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edrms/keyprocess/cp/Pages/home.aspx)

Strategic Planning Online Tool (SPOT) – Login required [apps.edustar.vic.edu.au/spot](http://apps.edustar.vic.edu.au/spot)

Victorian Public Sector Commission Codes and Standards website – Code of Conduct for Directors [vpssc.vic.gov.au/resources/code-of-conduct-for-directors](http://vpssc.vic.gov.au/resources/code-of-conduct-for-directors)

# Handout A1

## How effective is your leadership

As president you have a responsibility for the effectiveness of your council. You help set the agenda for council meetings, chair the meetings and act as a spokesperson for school council. Use this chart to assess your effectiveness and that of your council.

	Never (Mark with an X)	1 (Mark with an X)	2 (Mark with an X)	3 (Mark with an X)	4 (Mark with an X)	5 (Mark with an X)	Always (Mark with an X)
1. I meet the principal before every school council meeting to discuss the agenda and any issues of concern.							
2. I make myself available to the principal and the school whenever needed.							
3. I am open, fair and candid in my dealings with all school council colleagues.							
4. I support all school council colleagues and ensure they are heard at council meetings.							
5. I look for opportunities to build relationships with others in the local community, particularly influential individuals and groups.							
6. I understand and refer to the school council Code of Conduct and council Standing Orders at every meeting.							

# Handout A1

	Never	1	2	3	4	5	Always
7. Our school council meetings are conducted according to Standing Orders and always run to time.							
8. Our school council minutes are a true and accurate record of our meetings.							
9. I make it my business to report back to the school community after every school council meeting.							
10. Three things I might do to increase the effectiveness of my leadership are:	1.						
	2.						
	3.						

# Handout B1

## Scenarios for presidents

As president, how do you handle these situations?

Situation	Response
<p>1. Your school council meeting is about to start. Your membership according to the council constituting Order is 14 (seven Parent members, four Department employee members including the principal, and three Community members). Two of your Parent members are Department employees at other schools and one community position remains unfilled. Present at tonight's meeting are the principal, three teachers, two Community members (including the president) and four parents, one of whom is a Department employee. Do you have a quorum?</p>	
<p>2. One school council member continually dominates school council meetings no matter what agenda item is being discussed. You are aware that some other members hardly speak at meetings.</p>	
<p>3. You receive a letter from a parent upset at how the principal has handled a situation that resulted in her son being suspended for three days. The parent believes the suspension was not warranted and the principal was victimising her son. The parent wants this matter raised at school council and plans to attend the next council meeting to see that it is.</p>	
<p>4. You are about to close the school council meeting when a school council member indicates he wishes to have a matter discussed. He starts by saying some parents are concerned about the behaviour of a teacher outside school hours.</p>	

# Handout B1

Situation	Response
<p>5. Your school council has been considering a contentious issue for several meetings. Finally a motion has been put and the voting sees five votes for and five votes against. As president and chair, your vote went for the affirmative. Now what do you do?</p>	
<p>6. The finance subcommittee has recommended that school council not renew the school council's contract with the current cleaners. It recommends the school should hire a new cleaner, who is the brother-in-law of the principal. <b>Note:</b> this scenario relates to a rural or regional school council only as metropolitan school councils are no longer responsible for contracting school cleaners.</p>	
<p>7. School council decides it is time to review the student dress code and sets up a working party to consider this. Department policy states the community must be consulted on changes to the school's dress code. How should you proceed?</p>	
<p>8. As president of the school council, you are approached by a small group of staff members who would like to have a discussion with you about the school. You feel this is positive and agree to meet with them. At the meeting the group begins to make direct comments about their dissatisfaction with some teacher colleagues and the principal.</p>	

