

*Adapted by the Association of Yukon School Councils, Boards & Committees (AYSCBC) with permission from the Alaska School Boards Association (AASB) [www.aasb.org](http://www.aasb.org)*

## **WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY**

Available online at: [www.ayscbc.org/resources](http://www.ayscbc.org/resources)

### **What is Community Engagement?**

Community Engagement goes beyond the traditional notion of ‘community involvement’ or ‘public participation’. It can be seen as:

“...the intentional action of groups and individuals working together to create healthy environments that support the growth and education of children and youth.”

There are a lot of key concepts in that sentence that are important to our commitment to advocating for our young people: Intentional action... Groups and individuals working together... Create healthy environments... Support the growth and education of children and youth.

Engaging all sectors of our communities to ‘help kids succeed’ takes a different approach from focusing on young people’s problems and developing programs to address them. It comes from the strengths-based perspective of what do kids need in our world today to SUCCEED. What we know in our hearts, and from many years of research and evidence, is that young people need multiple caring adults in their lives to support, encourage and provide meaningful opportunities for them. They need clear boundaries and expectations, and they need good role models.

*(NOTE: To learn more about how communities all over Alaska have created effective ways to support young people, and to learn the research behind this approach, visit AASB’s Alaska ICE website: [www.alaskaice.org](http://www.alaskaice.org).)*

### **How can my School Council encourage broad-based community engagement?**

School Council members are in an ideal position to foster a sense of shared responsibility within the community for the success of ALL kids. You can lead by example. You can enlist neighbours, local businesses, First Nations, municipal organizations, youth-serving organizations, families...all adults in your community... to learn how they can be intentional in their daily interactions with youth, to look for opportunities to provide positive supports for youth, and to create opportunities for meaningful involvement of young people in schools, organizations, and the community.

### **How can I make sure I represent community sentiment?**

You will not be able to speak with everyone in your community on all issues; however, the School Council as a whole should be able to gain input from a cross-section of community members.

A variety of approaches can be followed:

--holding your Council meetings at different locations in the community. Consider including key community members on various school committees. At a minimum, the Council members should make a point to get out in the community and talk to people about the school system so you can learn what their issues and concerns are. The more you talk to people, the more you will be able to reflect community sentiment in your deliberations on various issues.

### **How should the School Council communicate with the community?**

Use your school's newsletter to let parents know what matters are being discussed, how their input is needed, what decisions are made. Post news on your school's website, ensure your School Council has a section that is updated monthly. Let your community know how they can access these updates, as well as how to contact you as School Council members.

The more your community is involved in the schools, the easier it will be to gain their help when you need it — whether it is to participate with reviewing the School Growth Plan, or perhaps to explain a controversial decision that the School Council makes. And be sure to celebrate the successes of your school with the community as well!

### **What if I have a different viewpoint than my constituents?**

You were elected to represent your community, not to promote just your own opinion. That said, not everyone in the community will agree on an issue. If you feel you have gathered community input, you should base your decision on what is best for the students in your community. Remember, also, that individual community groups may focus on a single issue or concept, and these people probably have not benefited from the information and facts you have received. As an elected School Council member, you have been empowered by your community to make decisions for them. Factor in differing community opinions the best that you can, but in the end you should vote responsibly and ethically, with the majority of students in mind.

### **How should I respond to parental complaints?**

If contacted individually, you should refer the person to the appropriate channel of authority, except in unusual situations. School Council members should not take private action that might compromise the Council or Administration.

The best way to respond to parental complaints is to be a good listener. In the process of listening, you can ask questions to understand the situation better, but be careful the parent does not interpret your questions or comments as an indication of future School Council action. Once parents have shared their complaints with you, try to give them guidance on how to get their concerns addressed through the proper channels.

It is critical that you know, and are able to explain, the school's complaint procedures. Encourage them to follow the prescribed steps. Remember, it is not your responsibility to take on the concerns of each community member who calls you. You are not the source for their solution (as a single School Council member, you don't have that kind of authority), you are a resource that will help them solve their own issues. You should listen to them, but then make sure they know to contact the school staff to have their concerns addressed in the appropriate manner. It's important they understand that, in your role as a School Council member, you do not get involved in the management of the school; your role is to set goals and oversee the school's operations.

### **What are some strategies for responding to vocal opponents to School Council decisions?**

Often times, community members just want to know that they have been heard. When people show up at a School Council meeting to voice a concern, be sure you treat them with respect and listen to their comments. Ask questions to fully understand their point of view. A Council meeting is not an appropriate place for an argument on any given issue. And the Council should resist the urge to take a collective vote on an issue that the speaker claims is urgent, but is not listed as an action item on the agenda. In fact, it is highly recommended that any issue "sprung" on the School Council at a regular Council meeting be referred to the Administration or a School Council committee for discussion and review. If any action is then determined to be necessary, it can be added to the agenda for a follow-up meeting.

For opponents who voice their disapproval at another time, you should listen and ask questions to show your interest and gain a greater understanding of their issue. You can explain the decision-making process that the Council followed to arrive at the unpopular decision, if the person is willing to listen. Try to not become defensive or emotional with the person. Remember they are not attacking you personally; they are simply communicating their unhappiness with a decision made by the entire Council. You are just one of several people on the Council.

### **How does one encourage School Council service?**

Promoting School Council service as a meaningful way to contribute to your community is an on-going responsibility for School Council members. Your actions, teamwork and enthusiasm for Council service will influence people in your community to consider serving on your School Council. Attracting qualified and energetic candidates results from your year-round activities, not just at election time. By increasing community participation within the schools, you can identify community members who might be willing to consider School Council service.

Invite individuals to join ad hoc committees, volunteer at school in the classroom or simply attend various events at school to become more involved. In this way, potential candidates can become more aware of the challenges facing your schools and the successes you have enjoyed.

## **How can School Councils increase public participation and support at meetings?**

The first place to encourage public participation at meetings is to review how you treat the public when they come to your Council meetings. A pleasant environment, a few social amenities and a regular method by which the public can address the Council not only contribute to good decision making, but will also foster good public attitudes about those decisions. The cardinal rule in building support for public education is to invite input and treat the public with respect. School policies and procedures should make people feel that they are a welcome part of the Council meeting and resulting decisions.