

Tab 16 ~

Communication in Your PAC, DPAC, and School Planning Council

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Communication in Your PAC, DPAC, and School Planning Council

PACs, DPACs, and school planning councils are becoming more creative and sophisticated in communicating with their membership and the community. Keeping our members and partners informed through ongoing communication is essential to the effectiveness and smooth operation of our councils.¹

Why do we want to communicate?

To communicate effectively, we need to understand *why* we want to communicate—What are we trying to achieve through communication? Communication helps us

- build relationships and understanding among our members, education partners, and the community
- demonstrate to our members and others the value and importance of what we are doing
- mobilize our members and others to join us in bringing about positive change for students.

What do we want to communicate?

We need to be clear about our key messages. What do we want our members and others to know? Different types of information can be communicated in different ways, and often the *method* of communication determines how well the message is received and understood.

Important information includes

- the purposes and goals of the council—Why does it exist? Why would a parent want to become involved?
- What does the council do day-to-day, month-to-month?
 - events
 - meetings
 - services

¹ Thanks to Pat Webb, parent, Chantrell Creek Elementary School, School District #36 Surrey, for many of the ideas in this Tab.

- What opportunities does the council offer parents?
 - parent education
 - a forum for discussion of educational issues
 - the opportunity to be involved in school planning
 - the opportunity to be involved in setting priorities for the school and district
 - leadership
 - organization of events
- What services does the council offer parents?
 - information about the school and district, and how to communicate with staff, administrators, and elected officials
 - facilitation of meetings and discussion with other parents on educational issues in the school and district
 - advocacy
- What educational issues is the council focusing on? How does the council gather input and formulate a position on an issue?

How can we communicate?

There are two basic ways to communicate, written and oral.

Written communication includes

- newsletters and bulletins
- notices
- brochures and flyers
- calendars
- parent handbook
- meeting minutes and reports
- surveys
- bulletin boards
- sandwich boards and signs, including electronic signs
- e-mail
- websites
- press releases

Oral communication includes

- council meetings
- committee meetings
- focus groups

- meetings with school and district personnel
- one-to-one conversations
- phone-outs, including auto-diallers
- school public address system
- school assemblies

Newsletters and calendars

A regular newsletter or page in the school or district newsletter remains one of the best ways to get the word out to parents, especially at the elementary level. Try to make your council's information stand out by putting a banner across the top of the page or using differently coloured paper.

Many schools, and some districts, produce a monthly or full-year calendar showing all important dates at a glance. Ask your principal (or district superintendent) to include PAC, DPAC, SPC, and BCCPAC events and meetings in **bold** or *italic* type. Or consider producing your own calendar.

Other effective print methods are

- a bulletin board at the school entrance or foyer of the school district administration office (remind parents it is there for their use)
- a sandwich board or electronic sign on the road or at the parking lot entrance announcing the next meeting or event
- flyers handed out to students and parents at pick-up and drop-off time.

Electronic communication

Communication by e-mail and websites is common in schools, particularly large secondary schools.

Ask your principal or superintendent how the council can access electronic communication with information for parents.

- Is there a school or district policy on parent use of the website or e-mail system?
- How often does the school or district update its website or send an e-mailing?
- How are parents added to the e-mail list? How many parents are on the list?

- What kind of information goes out, and what can parents send?

If there is no centralized e-mail system, consider creating your own system—

PAC—With parental permission, the school may give you e-mail addresses from registrations. If not, ask parents at every meeting to add their address to your list.

DPAC—Ask every council representative to include their e-mail address, or a PAC address, with their registration information.

Remember to show good judgment in your use of e-mail. Reserve it for important information such as meeting reminders and upcoming events, and keep your messages short. Use the e-mail function that allows you to hide the addresses on your list so that no one else can use them. Encourage recipients to “Read the message, delete it, or pass it on.”

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Meade

Word of mouth

Even with the ease of electronic communication, nothing replaces the personal touch, especially when you are trying to persuade busy people to become involved in something new.

Word of mouth remains one of the best ways to reach people. Councils find that the phoning committee draws parents in and makes them feel welcome—a key ingredient to greater involvement.

PAC—In setting up a phoning committee for your PAC, assign a list to each caller so that the caller becomes acquainted with the parents on their list. Reserve phone-outs for important events, and concentrate on new parents to the school. A phone call to these parents after their first PAC event will encourage them to come again.

DPAC—In your DPAC, assign a list of PAC representatives to each caller, and encourage your callers to establish a good relationship with the parents on their list. This may become the most effective way you communicate with your DPAC members.

Callers can ask parents how they like to receive information: What gets their attention? What do they usually ignore? Callers can also use the opportunity to survey parents on a “Question of the Month”.

How will we know we are communicating effectively?

Councils need practical measurements to assess how well they are communicating with their members and partners. Some measurements are

- attendance and participation at meetings, presentations, and social events
- level of participation in focus groups, special events, or projects
- level of response to requests for volunteers
- feedback from surveys or requests for information. This includes both the *quantity* of feedback and what the feedback *tells* you about parent awareness and understanding of issues.
- frequency of member requests for information or assistance
- response from education partners to requests for information or assistance
- response from education partners to invitations to meetings or events.

Sample Communication Plan

On the following page, you will find a **Sample Communication Plan**.

List the important information you want to communicate under *Key Messages*. Update the table regularly—a monthly update works best.

**Sample Communication Plan
November 20__**

Key Messages	School Assembly	Newsletters	Notices	Bulletin Board	PA System	PAC Meetings	Website	Focus Groups
SPC		✓				✓	✓	✓
Parent Conference		✓		✓		✓	✓	
Budget		✓				✓		
Bullying issues	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
Healthy Lifestyles	✓	✓				✓		
Christmas Hampers		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	

Communicating with the Media

Make your contact with the media positive, professional, and productive.

Your council may have occasion to talk to the media, usually in the following circumstances:

- your council issues a press release
- your council spokesperson calls a reporter on an issue or event the council wants publicized
- a reporter calls your council president or spokesperson and requests an interview on a current issue.

Only the person designated to speak on behalf of your council (usually the president) should talk to media. All media inquiries should be referred to the designated spokesperson.

In all of these circumstances, your goal in communicating with the media is to get *your* message across and be quoted correctly.

Tips for writing a press release

Press releases are an excellent way to get your message to the media and the multitude of readers and listeners the media serves. *You* have control of the message. To write an effective press release—

- Limit the press release to one page, if possible.
- Put the most important information first. You want the reporter picking up the press release to know the story, and why it is important, by the time she has finished reading the headline and first paragraph. Detail and background information follow, in decreasing order of importance—the less important the information, the further down it appears.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Include one or two quotes that you would like to see reported.
- Include contact information at the end.

Expect, and be prepared for, a phone call from a reporter about your press release. Familiarize yourself with the key message you want to get across, and even practice out loud! Keep in mind the tips on the following pages for handling interviews with the media.

Only your council's designated spokesperson has authority to speak to the media on the council's behalf. Check your bylaws!

When a reporter calls²

Whether or not you are expecting the call, you are entitled to ask a few questions up front. There is no rule that says the reporter gets to ask all the questions or that you have to do all the answering. Appropriate questions are

- *What is your name, media outlet, and phone number?*
- *Why are you calling me?*
- *Will you be taping this interview?*
- *What is the story about? What angle are you working on?*

When a reporter asks a general question, she could be working on a story from any number of angles. Knowing the story angle tells you what the context will be, so that you can supply the information that *you*, rather than the reporter, believe is relevant.

- *Where did the story come from?*

Knowing the origin of the story may tell you the reason for a question, putting you in a better position to respond.

- *Who else are you going to interview?*

This will give you a clearer understanding of the context and whose comments may appear next to yours.

- *What do you know about this issue?*

You may have to give the reporter background information. This is your opportunity to educate the reporter on the issue as your council sees it.

- *What is your deadline?*

This is a critical question. You want to avoid answering “under the gun”. There are ways to buy yourself time.

Buying time

A reporter wants one thing from you—a quote or “sound byte” in time to meet her deadline. Your comments will be edited, clipped, and reorganized. In most interviews, the reporter’s questions are

² This information is adapted from *Media Wise Relations*, a presentation by Carol Boothroyd. BCCPAC Leadership Conference 2000.

not printed or aired, with the result that your comments read like a statement rather than the answer to a question.

To think and prepare the best response, buy yourself some time by telling the reporter you will call back in 15 minutes. Then make notes, call another council member, and script out some of your answers. Write down key messages—*your* agenda—and underline key words. Call back within the time you promised.

Tips for talking to reporters

An interview is not an ordinary conversation. The reporter is gathering information. Your objective is to make sure *your* key message is communicated.

- Try to be concise, quotable, and easy to understand. Avoid jargon.
- When you have finished what you want to say, *stop talking*. The reporter may wait, encouraging you to speak freely. Resist the urge to fill the silence, as you may say something beyond what you intended.
- There is no such thing as “off the record”. Anything you say may appear in print or on the airwaves.
- You are speaking on behalf of your council. Begin with “As the spokesperson for the PAC, I can tell you parents believe...” rather than “I believe...” Avoid personal opinions.
- If the reporter asks you to speak for others—“What do you think the principal, teachers, trustees will say about...?”—respond with “I can only speak on behalf of the PAC, and parents have said...”
- Include your key message as part of as many responses as possible during the interview. Use connecting bridges between your answer and the reporter’s question, such as
 - “What’s really important here is...”
 - “The public needs to know that...”
 - “The bottom line is...”
- Use the connecting bridge if the reporter asks you to speculate or baits you—“Do you think this is just another cash cow?”