Damn Good Advice for School Councils

Twenty-five questions a school councillor needs to ask

ourcommunity.com.au
Where not-for-profits go for help

INSTITUTE OF COMMUNITY DIRECTORS AUSTRALIA
▸Knowledge ▸Connections ▸Credentials

Damn Good Advice for School Councils:
Twenty-five questions a school councillor needs to ask

Published by Our Community Pty Ltd,

Melbourne Victoria Australia

© Our Community Pty Ltd

This publication is copyright. Apart from any fair use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be produced by any process without permission from the publisher.

Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction should be addressed to:

Our Community Pty Ltd
PO Box 354
North Melbourne 3051
Victoria, Australia

Please note:

While all care has been taken in the preparation of this material, no responsibility is accepted by the author(s) or Our Community, or its staff, or its partners, for any errors, omissions or inaccuracies. The material provided in this guide has been prepared to provide general information only. It is not intended to be relied upon, or to be a substitute, for legal or other professional advice. No responsibility can be accepted by the author(s) or Our Community or our partners for any known or unknown consequences that may result from reliance on any information provided in this publication.

This guide draws heavily on the work of Nicholas Abbey from the School Governance Network – who cannot, however, be blamed for any errors or omissions.

The black and white illustrations in this guide are by John Tenniel (1820–1914). They were commissioned by Lewis Carroll for his books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871).

ISBN 978-1-876976-31-6

First published June 2019

Not-for-Profit
Sector Banking

Damn Good Advice for School Councils

Twenty-five questions a school councillor needs to ask

Thanks for being a school councillor – we want to support you in the important work you do.

Australian schools are abundantly and exuberantly varied. Each of the three broad groupings – government schools, faith-based schools and independent schools – covers an enormous range of schools of different sizes, budgets, organisational types, and educational approaches. (Australia's smallest school has three students, its largest over 4,500.) Each state and territory has its own legislation, its own bureaucracies and its own peculiarities.

Australian schools are run by any or all of governments, parents, appointees, religious institutions, corporations and charities. They're funded by any or all of federal, state and territory governments, parents and fundraising from the public. They're regulated by governments at all levels. They have to develop creative and innovative approaches within a common curriculum and common standards.

Schools are complex. They're in the teaching and learning business, yes, but they're also in the entertainment business, putting on hundreds of one-person shows five times a day to genuinely captive audiences. They're in the manufacturing business, refining their raw material (students) into polished units of output. They're in the IT business, transferring data from textbooks into the brains of those students. They're in the academic business, too, backing up with evidence and data their teaching and learning approaches. They're in the motivational training business, the childcare business, the wellbeing business, and almost every other business there is, all at the same time.

Schools have to meet, simultaneously, a range of different standards set by a whole lot of different stakeholders. Goals and missions are complicated, and the primary motive isn't the bottom line. School councils have to juggle different objectives and satisfy different audiences with different priorities through one budget's worth of allocations. They have to work productively with (among others) students, parents, principals, governments, teachers, unions and admin staff, all of whom have their own perspectives and idiosyncrasies.

There are all kinds of councils too. Some are purely advisory, some have plenary power over all aspects of the institution. Some are elected, some are appointed, some are both. Parents, teachers, students and community members all feature on some councils but not others.

Not many statements are true of all schools, but there are some things that are always true of good governance and productive partnerships, and quite a lot of things that are true of all effective council members. You need to know what the rules are, you need to know what your job is, and you need to know how to deal with people to get to where you want to take the school.

It's tempting to think that there is one ingredient that would lead to significant improvements in outcomes and performance if all schools had it. Unfortunately, there isn't.

Nonetheless, much can be achieved through advancing shared responsibility among educators, students, families, communities and other stakeholders. This is all about better governance and closer partnerships. Improving school governance and partnerships as a way to support student learning isn't the whole solution, of course, but it is an important part of it.

We want to give you the tools to support you in getting things done, because there's a lot to be done. Being on a school council is about education – and not only for the students.

Denis Moriarty
Group Managing Director
Our Community

Contents

A note on terms 9

1. Why am I here? 10

2. What makes a great school? 12

3. What are we trying to achieve? 14

Section one: the council 16

4. What are the rules? 17

5. What are we supposed to be doing? 19

6. What kind of council is this one? 23

7. Who's who on the council? 25

8. Who's what on the council? 32

9. What does the council do? 35

10. What else does the council do? 37

11. Do we have a policy on this? 39

12. What if something goes wrong? 41

13. What about the money? 43

14. What about the classroom? 45

15. How do we work with the community? 46

16. How diverse are we? 48

17. Are we doing the right thing? 50

Section two: the council member 52

18. How do I work with the other players? 54

19. What if we don't agree? 56

20. Where's the money coming from? 59

21. Am I financially literate? 61

22. What do the numbers mean? 63

23. How do I get things done? 66

24. What does 'fiduciary' mean? 69

25. What's in it for me? 74

Section three: preparing for the future 76

Appendix 1: Online resources 82

Appendix 2: Board composition checklist 85

Appendix 3: Code of conduct for school councillors (Victoria) 88

A note on terms

School councils operate in all Australian states and territories, across many streams and under a number of different legal formats. Consequently, there are different names for what are functionally much the same thing (and, just to complicate the issue, the same names for things that are functionally very different). For ease of reading, we've settled on these terms.

When we say	We mean
president	president *or* chair *or* chairperson
council	council *or* board *or* board of governors *or* committee of management *or* management committee *or* governing body *or* governing council *or* school association committee
council member	council member *or* board member *or* committee member *or* trustee *or* director *or* governor
principal	principal *or* headmaster *or* director *or* site leader
bursar	bursar *or* business manager *or* administrative officer
business plan	business plan *or* annual implementation plan *or* operational plan
constitution	constitution *or* rules *or* constituting order

1.

Why am I here?

Remember your own childhood, and your own school. Sure, it had fewer computers, but it was still then what it always will be – a complicated negotiation between what they were trying to teach you, what you paid attention to in the classroom, what you learned in the playground, what you got from your parents and what you took from the TV. Education is about what you can get to stick.

You're here to improve the education that happens in the school. As the Victorian legislation, for example, puts it, you're there to "enhance the educational opportunities of students at the school".

Boards must be infused with a passion for education

"Boards must be ambitious for all children and young people and infused with a passion for education and a commitment to continuous school improvement that enables the best possible outcomes."

Source: Governance Handbook, UK Department of Education

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/582868/Governance_Handbook_-_January_2017.pdf

Quotations in this guide

In this guide we quote (in boxes) examples from a number of sources from a number of jurisdictions. These examples won't necessarily apply to your school without major or minor modifications, and we're not necessarily endorsing them, but they do raise important issues and provide instructive perspectives.

You're on the council because:

- You're willing.
  You put your hand up for a difficult, unremunerated, and often thankless task because you felt someone had to do it.
- You're a precaution.
  You're keeping an independent eye on things so that nobody overlooks the legislation, mismanages the admin, or pockets the silverware.
- You're a representative.
  You provide a link to the community to reassure the general public that the care of the next generation is in safe hands.
- You're a visionary.
  You can stand above the day-to-day hassle and look into the future to see how to make the school the best school it can be.
- You have time to give.
  Don't think it's just a couple of evening meetings – we're talking days, not hours, and possibly weeks.
- You want to make a difference.
  Effective councils add value to education and learning. They bring together everyone's best efforts in building a consensus about where a school is going and how it will get there.

Yes, but what exactly is education, anyway?

Education – what it is, how to promote it, and how to know when it's happened – has never been a straightforward matter, or an easy one.

Education and learning are always changing, with profound implications for school governance. Among these challenges are:

- responding to the individual needs of students through increasingly personalised learning
- developing networked learning communities larger than the individual school
- bridging the gap in attainment between students who experience high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and those who do not
- dealing with the enormous effect on children, young people, teachers and teaching of digital tools and technologies, with online learning within and outside the school
- building partnerships and communities of opportunity and support around learners with their own specific needs.

Anybody with children and learners themselves can understand how difficult it is – and what's at stake.

Going through the hoops.

2.

What makes a great school?

It's not possible to give precise specifications for a great school, and we wouldn't want to if we could. Still, here are some questions to assist you in forming your own vision. These kinds of questions can inform your council's policy, planning and partnership discussions.

Leadership and vision

- Is there a clear vision and direction which the school needs to move toward?
- Does the school openly and objectively discuss the school's achievements and its challenges?
- How do teachers and parents play key roles in the school?
- Are students of all backgrounds routinely involved in some form of substantive leadership?
- How is leadership distributed among many people – not only in relation to education, but also in such things as technology, community participation and building partnerships?

School governance

- How are the principal and leadership team, teachers, parents and students involved in decision-making?
- Does the school's governing body add value to the school and students?
- Does the council reflect the school's demographics?
- Does the school publicly display its shared vision and goals in understandable, explicit terms to its community in a variety of ways?

Management and values

- Do key school leaders have good people management skills?
- Is there genuine warmth between students and teachers?
- Is the school a safe, respectful place?
- Does the school greet visitors in a friendly and helpful way?
- Is there a well-publicised policy about values, behaviour and relationships? Does it apply to all school community members?
- How is the success of the policy monitored – and by whom?
- Are conflicts and complaints managed well?

Teaching and learning

- Do school documents and the school's leaders convey a strong sense of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching and learning?
- Are teachers given time for professional development as well as resources to plan and work collaboratively to develop the most effective teaching and learning?
- How is the school working toward culturally and socially inclusive teaching and learning?

- How does the school assist students to have a strong mix of both deep academic knowledge and applied or practical learning in classroom and community settings?
- Is the school developing really personalised learning that is built on all learners' needs, aspirations, goals, strengths, interests and right to all-round personal development?
- Are all students supported to acquire a strong capacity to speak clearly, publicly, competently and confidently?

Curriculum

- How is the school addressing the right of all students to curriculum breadth, depth and balance, and to high standards in all learning areas, not just some of them?
- Does the school have a vision of quality languages education for all students? What percentage of students are bilingual?
- How does the curriculum support students to explore knowledge and concepts in depth, and enable teachers to connect new ideas with students' personal experiences and insights?
- To what extent is the curriculum planned by the school to respond to local needs, interests and priorities?
- Is the school part of a network or cluster of primary and secondary schools?
- Does the school provide clear guidelines about the curriculum and the expectations for students at each year level?

Technology and communication

- Given that students can be inundated by online information, how are they supported to separate deeper learning and knowledge from superficial fact-gathering?
- Does the school have a technology policy and plan (created, ideally, by a team involving teachers, parents and students)?
- Are teachers and other staff provided with adequate time for supporting three-way communication between teachers and learners and their families?
- Is there a practical plan to improve school communication over time?

Partnerships and community

- To what extent does the school link and align the many settings – school, home, workplaces, community organisations – in which students learn, develop and find support?
- Are students themselves able to draw upon, and link, these multiple areas of their life and learning?
- Are parents informed at the beginning of each year about what will be covered in subjects and the expectations about student attendance, homework and participation and about how they can be a partner in their child's learning?
- When was the last time the school held a forum in which teachers, parents and students were involved in developing school values or providing input into a school plan?

Performance

- How is the school's performance monitored and evaluated? How is this communicated to the school community?
- Is the school adding educational value to student achievement beyond that which may be predicted given the social class backgrounds and prior attainments of students? What's the evidence for this?

Resources and facilities

- Are the buildings modern and well-maintained? Are the grounds neat and safe? Are the toilets modern and well cared for?
- Is there a good mix of large and small spaces for learning?
- Are there facilities for music, sport, technology, art and science?
- Are there adequate resources (including time) and support for the efforts of staff (in partnership with families and the community) to improve the opportunities and outcomes of students?
- Are key school improvements fully funded and appropriately supported and not simply reliant on the goodwill of teachers and staff to bring about their successful implementation?

3.

What are we trying to achieve?

By joining the council, you're agreeing to get behind the school's mission – or to further develop it. Either way, it's the most important aspect of your service.

Vision, mission and values

As a council member, you're trying to support the school to improve. You want it to be better.

Yes, but as a council you have to be more specific. You have to paint the picture. Your school's vision, mission and values form the basis of good governance and an effective school.

Some schools have vision and mission statements, some refer to goals or aims. The difference between vision and mission statements can cause confusion. Vision statements may be mission statements, and vice versa. Whatever the name, it's about what you want to see happen.

Your vision

A vision looks forward and creates a clear and succinct view of what the school wishes to achieve. It's inspirational and aspirational, and presents the school with a challenge. The questions on your mind when you're drafting a vision statement might include:

- What problem are we seeking to solve?
- Where are we headed?
- If we achieved our goals, what would the school look like four, five or ten years from now?

It should, in a few sentences, describe what the school will look like in three to five years' time, including all the changes you're trying to bring about.

It should be

- Able to describe what students then will be achieving
- Ambitious, but achievable
- Based on shared values
- Open to new opportunities
- Based on consultations with students, parents and staff
- Simple and clear enough to be communicated to the school and its stakeholders.

Your mission

A mission statement is a concise explanation of the school's purpose. It supports the vision and communicates to all stakeholders the work the school does. When drafting a mission statement, you need to answer three questions about why the school exists:

- What do we do?
- Whom do we serve?
- How do we serve them?

Your values

Values are about what people in the school do when nobody's looking. They're qualities like integrity, honesty, teamwork, inclusiveness, objectivity, generosity and respect.

Don't just copy your values from a list, though, however inspiring. Think about standards of behaviour for all. Think about how you want the school to be different. Think about what you can honestly say you strive for in your own life – because, as a council member, you're supposed to exemplify these values. If you don't think they're important, nobody else will.

These values aren't susceptible to precise measurement – you have to wait for a situation that tests them to know whether they stand up. They're one of the few parts of your strategic plan you don't need to review every couple of years.

A values statement lists the key principles that guide the school and its culture. Values guide decision-making and create criteria against which actions can be assessed. Questions to consider when drafting a values statement may include:

- What values are significant for our school?
- What values should guide our work?
- What conduct should we all uphold?

If your school can't clearly and simply define where it is going (Vision), the reasons for what it does (Mission) and the principles that guide its work (Values), it will struggle to align people, processes, practices and resources towards a successful future.

Blow your own trumpet.

Frankston High School's mission, vision and values

Frankston High School's motto, Optima Semper (Best Always), has inspired successive generations of students, teachers and parents since the establishment of the school 90 years ago.

In 2009, a clear community vision and associated values were developed:

Vision: Together we become purposeful learners.

Values: Respect, responsibility, integrity, empathy, optimism and persistence.

Our school community firmly believes that if we do our Best Always and show behaviours that uphold our values then we are more likely to achieve our vision of becoming purposeful learners. However, in 2012 our community decided that we needed to define the attributes of a purposeful learner. Consequently, our mission statement was developed, further articulating the attributes of a purposeful learner.

This mission statement drives curriculum planning, our framework for teaching and learning, and in fact all learning activities that occur in our school community.

Mission statement

The aim of FHS is to support the continued intellectual development of our students and prepare them to understand and practise:

- Independent learning
- Critical and creative thinking
- Behaviours that contribute productively to society
- Effective communication
- Sound physical, emotional and social behaviours.

Source: School strategic plan for Frankston High School southern metropolitan region 2015–2018

http://www.fhs.vic.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Frankston-High-School-Strategic-Plan-2015-2018.pdf

Section one: the council

There are many different kinds of councils. Some councils are there to set policy and shape plans, while some are there to offer advice.

Some things are different in every school. Some things are common to most schools. Once you've got an idea of the particular organisational quirks of your own school, you'll be ready to zoom out to general principles.

4.

What are the rules?

All council members need to know what the rules are (or at least where they're to be found).

We can't tell you exactly what these rules are, because there are so many kinds of school councils, all with different rules, but ask the president for copies of:

- The constitution of your school (under whatever name – your constituting order, rules, etc.). This says what you must and mustn't do.
- Your code of conduct. This says what you should and shouldn't do.
- The council's standing orders. Standing orders are the rules the council has adopted to cover its own meetings.
- The school's mission statement, or statement of purpose
- The school's strategic plan
- The school's business plan
- The regulator's most recent report.

Ideally, most of these will be online. You also have to pay attention to:

- The Australian Education Act 2013
- The state education act you're under
- Your school's policies.

Ask, too, for details of the indemnities or insurances that will apply to you and your work on the council.

A warning, though: you can't expect these documents to provide you with the answers to all the questions that come up. That's not what they're for. People who write sets of rules know that you can't anticipate everything, and you may find that the wording of the things you're forbidden to do are actually pretty vague. All this documentation will, however, provide you with a basis for your work.

As well as the general rules, you should get an idea of your school's particular circumstances. Look at:

- The school's last couple of annual reports (including financial statements)
- The last year's council minutes
- A phone and email contact list of the council members (and the principal).

And you may need:

- A mentor – someone who knows both the rules and the culture, and can fill you in on what the minutes don't say. They could be an experienced council member, or an ex-member.

A mentor can give you details on the personalities involved, pass along the funny stories that make up the school's history, and give you some sense of the key issues, as well as information on the council's culture and background.

Some schools, and some states, encourage new entrants to take council-focused training from external providers. If that's available, go for it (Check out the training on offer at Institute of Community Directors) **https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/training/home**).

Who's on the council with me?

Some councils have student members, or teacher representatives, some don't. Some have alumni, or donors, or community representatives. Some are appointed, some elected. Some boards appoint to themselves (and should be extra careful that they're not simply locking in their own beliefs and assumptions). Some serve indefinitely, some for a single year or two years. Some people are on it ex officio, some for their individual virtues. Go through the list with your mentor.

Who's above us?

If you're a government school, the council is ultimately a creature of the Minister for Education.

Church-based schools have a wide variety of relationships with the church, the clergy, and lay institutions. Some are closely involved and personalised, some are more distant and detached.

Independent schools have different organisational charts and different traditions again; and again, you'll have to fit around them.

How often higher authorities intervene and how much scope you have for independent decision-making varies from sector to sector and from school to school. Ask your mentor how this has worked out in practice in the past.

All in all, that's a lot of paper. And it doesn't include the conventions, myths, habits, and traditions that also have to be taken into account. You'll be surprised, though, how soon you'll become comfortable that you know where the boundaries are and how far they can be stretched.

The key to the door.

5.

What are we supposed to be doing?

Governing. You, as a member of council, are there to contribute to the school's governance.

A school council's job is to help make the school better. What constitutes "better" is harder to define for schools than it is for businesses, because you can't simply appeal to the bottom line – but whatever excellence is in this context, it's the council's job to help maximise it. That's school governance.

The basis of good governance

Governance must be grounded in reality as defined by both high-quality objective data and a full understanding of the views and needs of pupils/students, staff, parents, carers and local communities.

It should be driven by inquisitive, independent minds and through conversations focused on the key strategic issues which are conducted with humility, good judgement, resilience and determination.

Source: *Governance Handbook*, UK Department of Education

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/582868/Governance_Handbook_-_January_2017.pdf

The Australian National Audit Office defines governance as "… the set of responsibilities and practices, policies and procedures, exercised by an agency's executive, to provide strategic direction, ensure objectives are achieved, manage risks and use resources responsibly and with accountability".

As with most definitions, though, the difficulty in practice is not laying down the principle but determining where the boundaries lie and what happens if you cross them.

From governance to processes to results

Governing bodies play their role by reinforcing the quality of institutional leadership: providing strategy, enabling scrutiny of direction and practice, offering guidance and support, and ensuring accountability. These qualities secure the authority and trust of schools as public institutions. By helping to improve the working of the institution, the governing body will make more effective the environment of learning and teaching and thus the possibility of enhanced standards of educational attainment. Better governance establishes processes that generate better results.

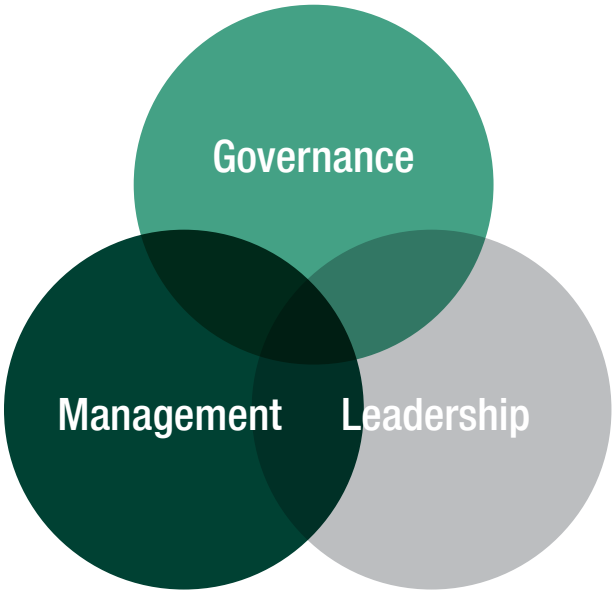
Source: "Does governance matter for school improvement?" (2005), by Stewart Ranson, Catherine Farrell, Nick Peim & Penny Smith, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice*, 16:3, 305–325.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09243450500114108

Governance is often now defined largely as being "not management". There is much research, and even more debate, and even some general consensus, on the respective roles of the council and the paid staff. The general assumption now is that a council will follow the Carver model (named after John Carver, the author of Boards that Make a Difference): steer, don't row. The assumption is that they will lay down policy and direction but leave the carriage of day-to-day management to the principal and staff.

The actual relationship is much more vaguely defined, and not just because the principal is also one of the members of the council.

There are some tasks that clearly fall in one sphere or another, and there are a lot of others where roles overlap and people must learn to share. There's no point in being territorial; in the educational environment shared leadership is stronger, more reliable, and much more productive.



Appointed or elected?

The duties of an elected council don't differ greatly from those of an appointed council – your duty is to vote for the best interests of the school, however you got there – but your areas of expertise and your field of action may be very different. If you're elected by one of the school's stakeholder groups, that gives you certain strengths and responsibilities. You may have been chosen because of your background in (for example) accountancy or law or marketing, which will enable you to bring specific areas of expertise to your role.

The council is (generally) responsible for ensuring the school is operating according to its strategic plan, that its finances are in order, and that it's operating legally. Any particular council can concentrate to a greater or lesser extent on:

- Leadership and performance – how an organisation sets its vision, develops plans, policies and strategies focused on improving outcomes and performance, and helps to build strong and productive partnerships between all its stakeholders
- Accountability and conformance – how an organisation assesses whether it's performing effectively, efficiently and ethically in the best interests of all stakeholders, and in accordance with the law, regulations, probity, accountability and openness.

How the council divides its energy between these elements, however, is up to the individual council. Some councils stress the first of these, some the last, and some concentrate on either one almost to the exclusion of the other (which is not recommended).

All these powers can be plenary (where the council has full power) or shared (where another entity or person must be consulted) or only advisory (where the council has no independent authority).

None of these powers, of course, are ever unrestricted. There are a lot of persons, bodies and agencies who can tell a school what to do in at least some areas, and there are a lot more persons and bodies and communities and stakeholders who want to be consulted (at least) from time to time. Each will have their own list of what's important and what's essential.

Regardless, council's role is more about directing than doing (although, of course, the process of directing also requires a certain amount of doing to be done).

The council can't make anything happen by itself. It has to work with, and through, and in partnership with, the other elements of the school community. If you are to move the school towards its goals then you have to operate this complicated machinery. You need to find out where the power lies and how to harness it collectively.

Achieving good governance

- Focus on improving learning outcomes for students
- Review progress on student learning outcomes
- Engage with the school community on student learning
- Lead conversations about key issues and challenges
- Evaluate and communicate with the school community about activities
- Promote meaningful family and community partnerships
- Monitor and review compliance and risk

Source: Northern Territory Council Of Government School Organisations (COGSO)

www.ntcogso.org.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2018/NT%20COGSO%20Guide%20to%20Governance_WEB.PDF

Making up your own mind

Whatever the constitution of the council, whatever its powers, whatever its customs, whoever elected or appointed you, there's one absolute law: nobody can tell you which way to vote. Your responsibility is to make every decision based on what you, as an individual, think is right for the school. Not the principal, not the group you're elected from, not the minister, not the government, you. You're not a rubber stamp. If anyone suggests you should be, point out their mistake. Other people may be able to overrule you, but that's an entirely different matter.

Independence: it's not just a good idea, it's the law.

Insights into the role of a school council: Yarra Me School

The Yarra Me School Council plays a significant role in complementing and supporting the great work of the staff.

Some years ago, the council commissioned a study to explore how the school might continue to evolve. Following extensive discussions among staff and school community stakeholders, including school council, the study made recommendations in relation to:

- A common purpose and a whole school approach to improving outcomes
- Student learning, engagement and achievement
- Data and evidence-based practice
- Partnerships and joined-up services
- The optimal use of digital technology
- Deeper personalisation in learning
- Prevention and early intervention.

In turn, this study informed the new strategic plan that the school was about to develop. Council also worked to optimise everyone's input into the development of the strategic plan.

Through all of its policy, planning and partnership work, the Yarra Me council has championed the school's focus on:

- Personalisation: how the school supports each learner as a whole person with particular needs, interests and goals. This means combining learning, development, health and wellbeing outcomes for a student as a whole person and focusing on each student's strengths.
- Strong learning relationships: learners, teachers, families, parents, caregivers, health professionals and others working closely with each other to best meet the needs of each learner. Yarra Me refers to this as the 'team and network around each learner'.

The principal and council president make sure that each council meeting agenda has a focus on aspects of the goals in the strategic plan. The principal's report at each meeting also outlines the school's work and progress toward the goals.

The Yarra Me council helps to promote the collaborative and inclusive character of education as the basis of improving outcomes for all students.

Source: Nancy Sidoti, principal, and Nicholas Abbey, school council president, Yarra Me.

6.

What kind of council is this one?

There is an enormous number of governance models (and an even more enormous number of different ways of providing a child with an education) and you'll probably find that you don't recognise your school in some of what we'll be talking about below.

That's all right; just look at what we put forward, compare it with your own school, and use the differences to spark a fuller understanding of your own position. It can help to stand outside your traditions and speculate why and how your school got to where it is now.

So what kind of council are you joining up for?

One way to classify councils is by where they put their time. Many commercial boards use management guru Robert Tricker's governance model (right) to assess this. Schools may find that this model is useful in shaping the balance between their council's performance and accountability work.

Another way to classify councils is by using Ranson's[1] typology, which looks at the relationship between the principal and the council and how the council operates. Ranson sees four types of governing body:

1. A deliberative forum

Where discussions are determined and led by the principal. Council members, especially parents, don't feel they can ask questions about significant issues.

2. A consultative sounding board

Where the principal brings policies and strategies to the council for consent and authorisation. Council members authorise decisions, but have little role in shaping them. There are debates, but in the end the principal decides.

3. An executive board

Where there's a division of labour in which the council has overall responsibility for the business aspects of the school – the budget, staffing, and infrastructure – and the principal assumes overall responsibility for curricular aspects of the school.

4. A governing body

Where the principal maintains strong leadership, but is seen as a member of the council rather than its head. The president has the main role in facilitating the meeting. The council takes overarching responsibility for the conduct and direction of the school.

Is your council one of these, or a mixture of several? Does everybody on the council agree on what you should be doing? Ask your mentor whether there's a consensus.

1 "Does governance matter for school improvement?" (2005), by Stewart Ranson, Catherine Farrell, Nick Peim & Penny Smith, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice*, 16:3, 305–325.

7.

Who's who on the council?

Every type of council member has their own strengths, and you want your council to be able to draw on many of those strengths.

Having specific positions on the council for various interest groups brings different perspectives together. It's also a practical demonstration of respect for segments of the school community that might otherwise feel alienated from school governance to the point of being pushed into passive (or even active) opposition.

School systems and structures have changed over the years at various speeds and with differing levels of enthusiasm to accommodate social and political pressures. Most school governance systems, in fact, combine elements from many different historical stages along the way, and school rules can look like a trench through an archaeological dig, combining and confusing roles and relationships.

How diverse is your council?

The composition of school councils should adequately represent the multiple and diverse views in the school community so that sound decisions are made.

Source: *School Councils in Government Schools*, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2018

www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/school-councils-government-schools

Parents

Parents have an enormous influence on how and what (and whether) children learn, and any system that excludes their impact is at risk of spinning its wheels fruitlessly.

Parents provide a channel to the consumers of the school's services and a link to the local community. They offer a wider range of expertise to the more specialist teachers and administrators in the school's employ.

There have always been parents' groups involved with schools. Since the 1970s, though, they've been moving from a support role to meaningful participation. Parents are deeply invested in their children's education, and they want their perspectives taken into account in the way the school is run. Their role has been changing continually as norms of citizen participation and consumer control change in Australian society.

Many schools have both school councils and parents' associations or parents-and-friends running in tandem. If this is so at your school, aim to maintain strong communication links between the different bodies (perhaps by cross-memberships or cross-attendances) and try to distinguish their respective spheres of action.

Parent engagement for improved outcomes at Westgarth Primary School

Westgarth Primary School works collaboratively with parents, carers and families as partners to improve personal, social and learning outcomes for children. Some of the ways in which this is practised include the following.

Education subcommittee

The School Council established an education subcommittee. This provided a two-way path for communication between parents and the school. Parents can hear about the great work that the teachers do and broader DET initiatives. It also gives them opportunities to ask questions, provide their feedback and suggestions and raise any issues. The subcommittee meets twice a term.

Reporting

Parent opinion survey feedback and parent focus groups, undertaken via the education subcommittee, highlighted some reporting issues. Parents felt their children's reports did not necessarily reveal where their child was up to in their learning and tended to offer general descriptions of what was happening in the classroom.

In response to this, plain language reporting statements were developed. Parents reviewed them to ensure that the language was parent/carer-friendly, particularly when showing how students had progressed in their knowledge and skills. Such initiatives are important in "… bringing school and home together to work as a partnership ..." (parent).

Supporting parents to help their children in mathematics

The school supports parents and carers to understand and help their children with mathematics. Westgarth undertook a two-year journey of mathematics professional learning for staff. As part of this, the assistant principal developed a series of YouTube clips that highlighted effective, evidence-based teaching and learning strategies.

Parents were aware of the school's improvement focus in mathematics and wanted to access these strategies so that they could support their children at home. The clips were repurposed and uploaded so parents could see how mathematics was now being taught at the school.

The school also offered parents and carers education sessions on mathematics. Families wanted to know more about current approaches to teaching and learning. These sessions helped to build parent and carer knowledge and confidence and, in turn, pass this confidence on to their children.

Shaping policy and practice

The school employs a model of parental engagement with genuine and substantive opportunities offered to shape school policy and practice, supported by processes that are flexible and inclusive. The key parts of the approach are:

- Being open to feedback and input. Embracing the genuine interest and input from parents to make the school the best they can and provide students with the best outcomes.
- Authentic opportunities for partnership and input. Parents can see the results of their feedback such as reporting, the provision of education sessions and input into policy.

Impact to date

Parents feel more involved in the school and their children's teaching and learning. This is seen through:

- parent opinion survey responses
- attendance on the education subcommittee, which is the best-attended of the School Council subcommittees
- parent initiatives such as the Super Science Club. Parents are also engaged in volunteering in classrooms, in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program, and on various committees and working parties.

School boards: the New Zealand experience

Parents and community members told us that the demands currently made of boards discourage people from standing for election. Some trustees told us that the responsibilities they have as trustees are very different from what they thought they would be taking on when they put themselves forward to be on the board.

Society has also changed significantly in the last 30 years. Changes in work, family makeup and financial pressures mean that it can be increasingly difficult to find parents and others with the significant time to commit to the many responsibilities of board membership.

The demands of the role may help explain why board elections are not particularly well contested. In 2016, a board election year, 43% of schools did not have a vote for their board because there was no contest for the positions. Around a fifth of boards do not have the five parent trustees that they should have. Parent interest in who represents them on boards is not high. While the election of boards is one of the main opportunities to exercise democratic rights in Aotearoa New Zealand for parents, only 22% of parents nationally returned voting papers in 2016.

Source: *Our Schooling Futures: Stronger Together*, Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce

https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/tomorrows-schools-review/

Teachers and support staff

Teacher representation provides an element of worker democracy and empowerment in what is otherwise a straightforwardly hierarchical employment structure. Uniquely, teachers bring to the council both their professional expertise and skills and the latest news from the chalkface.

In some states, there are provisions to have school support staff (groundkeepers, teachers' aides, admin officers, etc) represented on council.

Students

If you've got student members, you'll need to support them. Being on school council is a tough job, no question. It takes students away from exam preparation, it raises issues that they may not previously have had the opportunity to address in depth, it involves them in committee procedures they may not have had much experience with, and even if everything works out perfectly they're not going to be in the job very long. On the other hand, they're going to receive a senior tutorial in how the world really works, and that's definitely worth having.

Student representatives should be cut lots of slack and receive the benefit of all the doubt that's going. They may need to be brought out of themselves and encouraged to speak up. They should certainly be called upon by the president when any particularly student-related issues are discussed.

Not every school council includes student representation. Victoria has just made it mandatory in state secondary schools, but in some states, and some systems, it's still a topic of vigorous debate.

If you haven't got student representation, though, you'll have to work out other ways of sampling student perceptions – surveys, focus groups, online feedback. Without their feedback, you're always going to be at risk of missing the mark with your students.

Having access to the user perspective is a great help in framing the school's direction – and it's good for the students. A recent study by the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, *Improving Wellbeing Through Student Participation at School*, found:

> Analyses showed that greater opportunities to participate at school were positively associated with greater wellbeing at school. This association was partly accounted for by students' experiences of recognition… (that is, feeling cared for, respected and valued at school and giving care, respect and value to others).
>
> The results found that participation predicted greater recognition, which in turn predicted greater wellbeing. Overall, the results of this study suggest that schools seeking to improve student wellbeing would benefit from introducing, monitoring and increasing opportunities for student participation.

Again, it doesn't hurt to repeat here that a student rep (like a teachers' rep, or a parents' rep) can't be instructed on how to vote on any issue by their electorate.

How to support student members of your council

Following are the Victorian Student Representative Council's top tips for helping students to make the most of their time on school council.

Remember that student members are an integral part of the school council and have as much right to be there as anyone else (maybe more – after all, the school council makes decisions that directly affects their education).

Support student members to learn more about their role.

Governance will be new to many student members and they will have a lot to learn. Make sure they receive adequate training, and, if possible, support them to meet with student members from nearby schools. Support them to find a mentor (an adult school council member, a teacher or a past student member) to help them review agendas, explain processes and wade through any confusing jargon and acronyms.

Recognise the important work of student members.

Students should not be disadvantaged by their participation in school council. Your school might support student members by allowing them some class time to prepare for school council activities, or by giving them special consideration for some assessments or exams. Financial support is also important – consider how you can cover travel costs incurred by student members, and if other school council members are paid for certain commitments, then students should also be fully compensated.

Structure meetings to support student members' full and meaningful participation.

This might mean doing things a little bit differently from how they were done in the past. Distribute agendas early so that students have time to understand them properly, seat students equally to other council members, and make space for explicit invitations for student members to speak up during meetings. You might even consider changing the time of meetings so they are accessible for all school council members.

Encourage student member participation in subcommittees.

Students should be supported to participate fully in all aspects of school council, especially subcommittees. This will allow student input at all levels of council decision-making. Support student members to consult with the rest of the student body to bring their views to subcommittee meetings.

Understand that the school council is just one aspect of meaningfully involving students in their education.

Encourage the school to support true student voice, agency and participation at all levels of the school community.

Source: Victorian Student Representative Council, 2018

Council members come in many different kinds.

Specialist appointees

Councils may feel they need particular expertise on hand – lawyers and accountants are particularly sought after, with marketing experts close behind. You should also consider policy development as a meaningful discipline, looking for people with community development or partnership-building skills. If you're expanding, think about bringing on a builder. Broaden your selection criteria so you don't end up with a Noah's Ark council – two lawyers, two accountants, two businesspeople. Health professionals and social scientists have lots to offer, as do community development practitioners.

If you don't think your existing board is financially literate enough to keep up with the accounts, consider enlisting a specialist – but remember that you can't stop there; the first job of the new member will then be to educate their colleagues, even if it involves bringing in a professional trainer. Ignorance of the law, or the accounts, is no excuse. A council member can't delegate understanding the accounts to anyone else.

Recruiting for skills and expertise

School councils may include members from the local community. School councils can use this option if they require certain skills or expertise, or if they are not able to recruit such skill sets through their parent category members.

However, very few councils use this option to recruit members with specific skills in finance, strategy and policy development. In our survey, we found that very few school councils considered the mix of skills and expertise needed to meet their objectives. Only 15 per cent of respondents use a skills matrix to identify strengths and gaps in members' skills.

As a result, nearly half of school councils prioritise filling membership positions with members who can make the time commitment, but do not necessarily have the right mix of skills and experience to fulfil the school council's objectives and deliver on their responsibilities.

Source: *School Councils in Government Schools*, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2018

www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/school-councils-government-schools

Community members

Some councils bring people from the community on to council, both to get their perspectives and to ask for their advocacy. The community does so much to shape the learner's development that it's valuable for both sides to have a means of promoting mutual understanding.

Schools are major players in the local infrastructure, too, and need to take care that they're not pushing the interests of others aside – at least not without consultation.

Representing the community is a responsibility that must be taken seriously and does involve some effort on the part of the school.

Community matters: 1

Schools depend for their success on a strong reputation in their local communities.

Building effective governing bodies, as a forum for community interests, is an essential part of the process of forging and enhancing a positive reputation for the school.

Source: "Models of self-governance in schools: Australia and the United Kingdom" (2001), by Tony Bush & David Gamage, *International Journal of Educational Management*, 15/1 39–44

Community matters: 2

Attitudes, relationships and decisions in the wider community also have a powerful influence on what students get from their educational experience and which resources schools can access. Building stronger relationships with the communities that surround schools leads to higher student achievement.

Source: *The Shared Work of Learning: Lifting Educational Achievement through Collaboration*, Mitchell Institute, 2015

8.

Who's what on the council?

The principal

The principal's sphere of authority covers different ground in every state and in each sector – perhaps in every school.

Arguments over territory generally come at the margins, and at the margins it's not easy to draw a clear line between what the principal does and what the council does. Ideally, this won't matter. What you want is a close collaboration where nobody worries too much about who's leading whom, and everybody respects the contribution of each other.

Deferring to the principal's expertise doesn't mean you give them a free pass. While you shouldn't look over their shoulder or second-guess their decision-making, your job is also to provide accountability and ensure that the mechanisms of the school are working as they should. The principal keeps the council informed of what's being done across the school and how it's working out.

A well-organised school keeps track, by the numbers, of how well each area is being administered, and is able to report on its operations in detail. How much detail is appropriate? The principal should be able to keep you in the picture without over-burdening you with details.

You shouldn't micromanage, but you do need to know that someone's managing the micro.

The office bearers

President

The president is responsible for supporting the council, keeping you pointed in the direction you should be heading in, and being spokesperson for the council in any dealings with the system or the community. They have to keep the wheels turning, and must see that motions and queries are followed up and carried through.

They're also in the chair, responsible for running the meeting, and that gives them quite a lot of influence in what goes through (or doesn't).

The president is your first port of call if you encounter difficulties. They should be able to inform you about the rules, advise you on the issues, and let you know about the different personalities on the council.

A good president is strong, but not bossy; is tactful, but capable of getting people to do what has to be done; allows everybody to speak, but still finishes the meeting in an hour and a half.

Treasurer

The treasurer not only has to understand the financials themselves, they also have to be able to explain them to you. If something is amiss in the budget, it's everybody's responsibility to find it, not just the treasurer's, and if anything goes very wrong, everybody, and not just the treasurer, could conceivably be held responsible. If you don't understand something, ask. Ask for out-of-meeting tuition. Read the other books in the *Damn Good Advice* series. And then ask the question again now that you can understand the answer.

On a school council you'll be partly in the hands of the treasurer, and the treasurer in turn will be relying heavily on the work of the school's finance staff, but the thing about delegating a responsibility is that it gets multiplied, not divided.

Secretary

The secretary may be a member of the council or a member of the school staff. In any case, it's their job to handle the paperwork and the correspondence and write the minutes. If you want to put an item on the agenda, or circulate anything to your colleagues, you go through them.

The members

The members are people like you – perhaps with a little more experience, perhaps with specialist expertise in one or another area. If you want to push any initiative or make any changes, they're the people you'll have to convince. Nobody has more than one vote, but some members will nonetheless be more influential than others – it won't take you long to work out who they are.

Chairing meetings is not always easy.

The subcommittees

If your rules allow you to, it helps to be able to discuss matters of detail in a subcommittee before bringing them to the full council for decision.

There are two basic types of subcommittee: one where the subcommittee is sent off to document the options – to do the pre-prep for the council's own discussions – and one where the subcommittee is given the authority to take the decision and report back afterwards. Every subcommittee should have a detailed set of terms of reference laid out by the council.

Subcommittees should be independent from the council (or there's no point having them) but not detached; it helps if they have some idea of how things will play out. There should generally be some overlap in membership – having the chair or the treasurer as ex-officio members, for example – but other subcommittee members should also keep the lines of communication open.

Subcommittees should have members who aren't council members, partly to bring in new perspectives and new expertise, and partly to provide opportunities for prospective council members to try things out. The council liaison person on the subcommittee should have their eyes open for new potential members.

There are times, too, when you don't need a continuing subcommittee. If you have a stand-alone issue to be advanced, set up a working group with a set timeline. It's easier to get people to join short-term groups dealing with clearly defined issues.

The council

We've discussed the parts that make up the council, but that's not the end of the story.

The council is not just six or ten or 15 people sitting around a table. It's more than the sum of its parts. All together you have powers – and responsibilities – that none of you have separately.

For example, the council is never in two minds about anything. It thinks whatever it has formally resolved to think, and nothing else. As an individual member, you can (and should) argue vigorously for your point of view up till the time of the vote, but once the vote's been taken you're supposed to fall in behind the decision.

The principle of council solidarity lays down that once a decision has been made it is the decision of the council, the only decision of the council, and the decision of all of the council. An incorporated association is in the eyes of the law a legal person – but only one legal person, which means that it can only have one opinion at a time. As a general rule, as a council member you shouldn't leave the meeting and attack the decision the council's just made.

This can be difficult. Councils can take decisions that some council members may not want to be associated with. If they wish to be free to oppose such a decision without restrictions, however, they should resign from the council and free themselves from the discipline that membership exerts. While they stay on the council they must express public support for its policies.

The rule of solidarity isn't unbreakable, and it's certainly not unbendable – an individual conscience can't be restrained, and fiduciary duties can override polite conventions – but if you're thinking about setting it aside you'd better be sure you have a very good reason.

A council member may, of course, continue to press their views within the council if they feel there's any chance of having the decision overturned, unless there are provisions in the standing orders to limit their rights in this area (some organisations forbid, for example, motions to revoke previous motions until a certain period of months or number of meetings has elapsed).

That's the legal position, but it can be a problem forcing your actual council into this format. There may be individuals who refuse to conform to the conventions, norms and codes. There may be permanent factions, where allies vote together as a bloc regardless of anything said in the meeting. This substantially reduces the value of having a council at all.

A smoothly functioning council achieves some sort of consensus on the way things should go, while a divided or unsure council will fracture often. Where there's division, the matter needs to go to a vote. Where there's agreement, however, matters should also go to a vote, just so it's clear what the consensus actually was. Every decision taken by the council needs to be documented, which means that every step in the decision-making process should be recorded by a motion in front of the council. It's the job of the president and the principal, with the help of the secretary, to ensure that nothing goes through without being recorded in the minutes.

9.

What does the council do?

Leading and planning

The president and the principal have agreed to take on some sort of a leadership role, though the boundaries aren't often very well defined. They're at the head of the council, and the council's at the head of the school community, breaking new ground.

Ideally, this should involve keeping up with new developments in education and schooling, and asking where your school stands. We've flagged a few of these ongoing developments – personalised learning, digital communities and social inclusion, for example – but you'll need to be open to many others.

Having an educational vision is important, but after that you have to map out how the school's going to get to where you all want it to be. You have to have a strategic plan.

- Start with the vision – how the school should look in a few years from now. Run this past your stakeholders for their comments.
- Break it down into a short list of particular fields, and for each of them say what you have to change to get there from here.
- How are you going to make those changes? What are the stages you'll have to pass through along the way?
- How will you know when you've got there? What are the criteria for success? How are you going to monitor progress?

A strategic plan isn't an end in itself, but rather a tool to guide change and improvement. The people implementing a strategic plan need to have enough flexibility and authority to be creative and responsive to new developments – and to be prepared to change current activities in order to achieve the organisation's mission in the light of new opportunities or challenges.

Planning is both top-down, with the council setting the school's overall direction, and bottom-up, with the staff ready to demonstrate what's feasible. The hardest thing about planning is people: finding out what they want, what they know, and where they fit. It's vital to have an organised planning structure that moves through an established planning process.

The process itself is important – almost as important as the actual plan. Unless you involve all the stakeholders, and they see their involvement as meaningful rather than tokenistic, you will not have buy-in from everybody who needs to be on board.

The inclusiveness of the process is vital. You have to build commitment and embrace public accountability. You must engage key stakeholders in the regular process of identifying priorities and evaluating strategies in the pursuit of changing people's lives for the better.

The whole school community should be behind the plan, and this places immense weight on your processes of consultation. All elements of the community – students, parents, teachers, volunteers, community stakeholders – should be given an opportunity to contribute (and must be included in the circulation of the final document). Inclusive and participatory planning processes are an indispensable element of a healthy school community and achieving great things together.

You will need a body that sees its role as keeping planning moving and meaningful. The council may be able to do this all by itself, but you may also think about a dedicated planning or policy subcommittee – either a standing committee that meets regularly or an ad hoc team or working group that meets every few years to review and renew your strategic plan. The former is probably preferable, giving you somewhere in the school that's keeping track of current trends and the implications of any government initiatives.

While the planning committee has the carriage of the process, it can't have exclusive rights to the area. Any modifications to the plan or policies must be approved by the full council. Even more important, any major change to the plan must get signoff from your constituencies.

Consider having a specialised curriculum subcommittee. Some elements of the curriculum are set externally, and much of the remainder falls within the realm of the principal and staff. It's up to the council, however, to assure itself that the curriculum has the breadth and balance that students will need to prepare themselves for the world ahead. A curriculum subcommittee is useful to flesh out the arguments and to allow the frank and free exchange of views.

Once you have a strategic plan, the school develops a one-year business plan (initially the principal will do this) that attaches targets and dates to the goals and priorities in the strategic plan.

The strategic planning process is useful only to the extent that it assists schools to honestly test old assumptions in the light of new information about the present, and anticipate the environment in which the organisation will be working in the future.

Every review should carry the plan forward several years, incorporating new developments and weaving in new long-term goals.

Sample strategic plan targets

- For xx% of students to meet the literacy/numeracy goal on their individual learning plan.
- By 2023, xx% of students studying VCAL will achieve their learning outcomes.
- By 2023, xx% of students enrolled in a VET unit will achieve satisfactory completion.
- All students to increase their initial reading assessment as measured by xx.
- Every student to show learning growth as measured by their ILP.

Source: *Developing Key Directions for the Next School Strategic Plan*, Victorian Education Department, 2019

10.

What else does the council do?

Monitoring and compliance

You may think that things are going along well enough – but if there were problems, would you know? What measures are you relying on?

The council is responsible for seeing that the school stays within its financial guidelines, and also for seeing that it meets its educational objectives. It's comparatively easy to oversee financial measures, but educational measures can be harder to assemble.

Academic monitoring

Your school will have access to a number of years of NAPLAN statistics. These cover NAPLAN test scores in reading and numeracy, and the gains students collectively have made over several years.

On the council, though, you have to consider the *whole* education experience – the quality of the teaching, staff morale, pupil wellbeing, the all-round development of a student as a whole person, and community involvement, to name a few things.

Some of this is built in. Victorian government schools, for example, have to report on:

- parent satisfaction summary
- school staff survey
- teacher assessments from the Australian curriculum/ Victorian Essential Learning Standards (AusVELS) – English, Mathematics
- average number of student absence days
- students' attitudes to school – connectedness to school
- students' attitudes to school – student perceptions of safety.

Schools aren't intended to use any of this information (or ATAR scores) as 'League tables' or simple rankings. They all depend enormously on the characteristics of the students enrolled at the school. What the school is responsible for is improvement – how much ground each student makes up over the year.

For most measures, the school is scored on whether it ranks ahead of or behind other schools with comparable student populations.

Every school has different information needs, and there's no single rule to govern what measurements you should pursue, or how. You may consider teacher reports, survey data, school absences, student disciplinary proceedings, or interclass comparisons. How are students from non-English-speaking backgrounds coming on? What are the outcomes for students with disabilities like? For what other groups do you need broken-down data?

Drilling into data

When assessing impact, consider the following questions:

- Do we have ready access to all the data and information we need to monitor the improvement priorities?
- Are we able to access that information independently, or do we depend on the senior leaders to provide it to us?
- Do we have the skills on the governing board to interpret data, or do we rely on senior leaders to do this for us?
- Is the information at the right level of detail – detailed enough to tell us what we need to know, but not so detailed as to make it difficult to read?
- Are we able to use benchmarking data to compare the school's performance with that of comparable schools (not only local ones)?
- Is information available on all the aspects of the school's performance that we agree are important, or only on those aspects that are easy to measure?

Source: *Being Strategic: A Guide for Governing Boards*, National Governance Association, 2018

https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/being-strategic-a-guide-for-governing-boards.pdf

Compliance

Every school has to observe the provisions of an enormous number of laws. Just reading them out, in fact, would take up quite a lot of the average council meeting. They include, just for starters, occupational health and safety law, employment law, environmental law, child protection law, charities law, trade practices law, tax law, discrimination law, contract law, fundraising law, and privacy law. When it comes to fundraising law, for example, every state has its own separate and different laws on who's entitled to make public appeals, and how, and what records have to be kept.

If just listing the relevant legal requirements is time-consuming, checking on them would be a full-time job for everybody on the school council. You have to take someone else's word that the school is fully in compliance. It's not enough, though, to ask, "Everything's fine? Good" once a year. You need to be satisfied that the school has a system in place to make sure that someone checks these things, on a regular schedule, and reports back.

The principal may place a report before the council at least once a year showing what's been done to keep compliant, who's responsible for each sector, what problems may have arisen, what laws have changed, and what the consequences will be.

11.

Do we have a policy on this?

Every organisation needs to have some things written down so that you don't have to start from scratch every time something comes up. You need a policy manual.

More and more, a school's policies are strongly affected by external requirements and not simply developed internally. In Victoria, for example:

> …the principal and the school council president are required to show in the Annual Report that the school has met the minimum standards for registration.
>
> Schools must have the following policies and procedures in place to meet the minimum registration requirements:
>
> - School philosophy policy
> - Student enrolment policy
> - Curriculum framework policy
> - Student engagement and inclusion policy
> - Bullying and harassment policy and procedures (including cyber bullying)
> - Supervision and duty of care policy
> - Excursion and camps policy
> - Visitor policy
> - Administration of medication policy and care arrangements for ill students
> - Anaphylaxis management policy and procedures
> - Mandatory reporting policy
> - First aid policy and procedures
> - Internet use policy
> - Emergency management plan
> - Communication of school policies, procedures and schedule policy
> - Working with Children Check policy and procedures
> - Procedures to maintain staff registers
> - Policies and procedures to support compliance with the Child Safe Standards.

Source: **https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/management/policypartich.pdf**

You do generally get some flexibility, though, and in that lies your opportunity to go that extra step and do it better. Where something is compulsory, the principal will tell you; when it's optional, the council can choose to take the lead in developing or modifying a policy.

The principal	The school council
• advises council about the need for school policy to meet government policy or legislation and guidelines	• determines the need for policy on local issues within its powers and functions
• contributes to policy development as a member of council	• develops policy including consulting with the school community if required
• implements policy	• regularly reviews existing policies
Source: **www.education.vic.gov.au**	

Again, the council is, in practice, going to rely heavily on the advice of the principal as to what is feasible, and the principal should take full advantage of what the council has to offer. All council members should know what the school policies are.

Internal policy changes have to be approved by the council. Policies should cover general principles, with the details of implementation being set out in a separate schedule that can be adjusted by the principal or relevant staff member as necessary.

At Our Community we have found it useful to have one policy in the policy bank that is plainly silly – a Sneezing Policy, say, or a Meteor Risk Policy. These aren't intended to be taken seriously, let alone enforced – but if a new council member doesn't rush up to you and say, "Hey, this sneezing policy is crazy!" you can be sure they haven't done their reading and you may call them out on it.

12.

What if something goes wrong?

Murphy's law says that anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Risk management is about keeping Murphy in check.

In the first instance, risks are to be avoided or reduced. Obvious examples include a council's handling of financial risks through its internal controls, its approval of the safety assessment for a school camp, and its authorisation of the removal of high-risk asbestos in a school.

A school council can play a key role in supporting and promoting a risk-aware culture. Among the ways that a council helps to govern risk (as distinct from the ways the school manages risk in an operational sense) are:

- **Identifying risks during a planning process.**
  In developing a strategic plan, it is good practice to assess the risks, both the risks that may need be taken (because the school needs to innovate) and the risks that may need to be reduced in achieving the goals and outcomes in the plan.
- **Progress reports in relation to the strategic plans and goals.**
  A council receives reports about the progress made on the implementation of the strategic plan and annual implementation plan. These updates may include an outline of the key risks encountered in achieving the goals in these plans.
- **Financial risks.**
  This includes an assessment (often during an audit process) of how the council handles financial risks and the internal controls and budgetary management.
- **Monitoring and reviewing.**
  This may include an internal review (maybe annually) of how the council's risk management, compliance and reporting systems are operating.
- **Handling conflict of interest risks.**
  These may include council's recruitment and selection activities, funding allocation activities, and any family or friendship relationships that could affect the council's work.

Physical risks generally aren't a job for the council. (That said, there are some jurisdictions where the council has to sign off on things such as individual school camps and outings. Precautions against abuse, too, require closer scrutiny.) In the main, the council needs to satisfy itself that the school has done its homework in this area.

Insurance

One of your more straightforward tasks is to check with the principal that the school is adequately covered for unforeseeable events that can find their way around your risk management precautions. Non-government school council members will also want to check what cover the school holds to cover their own work on the council.

Educational risks

When it comes to improving students' education, you have to take a rather different approach. Here, risk is not necessarily bad, and effective risk governance doesn't simply mean being risk-averse in all circumstances. Innovation in education and learning is risk. Development of a school in a new direction is risk. New strategic goals may pose a risk. The governance of risk is fundamental to making good decisions.

Avoiding risk is a risk in a dynamic, ever-changing school environment of new technology, innovative approaches to learning, and radical ways to better engage students in education. In short, there is a real risk in being risk-averse.

This calculation of sensible risk is not always factored into developing a school strategic plan. The council or planning working group may not have adequately discussed risk in this more strategic "eyes on the future" way. Key questions during a planning process include:

- How is risk built into the strategic plan?
- How innovative is the school aspiring to be?
- How risk-averse are the school and council in avoiding change that may benefit students longer-term?

The pursuit of school improvement or an educational opportunity is always accompanied by an element of risk. It's a matter of being smart about the risks that we take while dealing with the risks that must be avoided.

Things can go along fine for ages – and then you reach a tipping point.

13.

What about the money?

Finances

The principal

The principal provides council with the figures they have to work with, and will ensure that the columns add up and the books balance.

The treasurer

The council should elect a treasurer (who isn't the principal or the bursar) to gather information on money matters. This doesn't mean that other non-treasurer members can sit back and not contribute – everybody on council, no exceptions, is supposed to be financially literate, able to read financial statements and ask pertinent questions – but the treasurer should talk things over with the bursar to go behind the numbers and see where the problems might lie.

The finance committee

It's a good idea to have a properly delegated finance committee (that includes the bursar) so that you're not putting too much on the treasurer's shoulders. The finance committee can review the school's program plans for the coming year and take decisions on whether:

- these programs carry out the strategic plan
- this overall set of spending priorities fits with the strategic plan
- the figures look reasonable value for money.

In any case, it's important to have some council members with practical finance experience, and if your council currently doesn't, you should be looking around for new members.

The budget

Budgeting is simply the process of planning your school's finances for 12 months. It's all the activities you plan to undertake in the next 12 months, expressed in terms of money.

Ideally, the budget is aligned to the goals and priorities in the three-year strategic plan, and is checked against it at every point.

The council has to approve the budget, every year. This isn't just a formality. The council has to sign off on what's going to be bought and what's going to be spent, and any purchasing or spending that hasn't been approved is unauthorised and improper.

Preparing a budget should involve the principal, the council president, the bursar, and consultation with the heads of every section of the management or staff team. If you have a finance subcommittee or a budget subcommittee, they'll check the numbers before the budget comes to you.

Consider having 'Understanding the budget' as an agenda item before the actual budget arrives, so that the president and the treasurer can take you through what's at stake in the debates.

The budget team will review the school's past records of revenue and income (membership, sales, grants, fundraising, consultancy, interest), look at past records of expenditure (rent, wages, telecommunications), guess at likely increases or decreases in the year ahead, study the timing of costs and payments, and run some alternative scenarios.

Once the budget's approved, the staff are authorised to spend up to that limit, subject to any changes made from time to time, as each month's figures are reviewed by the council.

The systems

While the council shouldn't micromanage, it has to protect the school's funds. This involves checking that the school has an effective system of internal controls in place to ensure that:

- all financial transfers within the school are sound, accurate, documented, and legal
- the school's assets are safe
- council can rely on the accuracy of the financial information it receives.

The policies and processes dealing with financial transactions must be recorded in a policy manual, and the council ought to see it and approve them.

The council has to be on top of who has authority to spend money on behalf of the school, and what their limits are. The council may be generally responsible for all contracts made by the school, so it needs to know that nothing's being done outside the standard reporting system.

14.

What about the classroom?

Teaching and curriculum

The actual work of the classroom falls under the authority of the teachers and principal, and the council can't intervene. It's outside their competence. It's also, in one sense, their responsibility. The council should set the school's developmental priorities, and it'll need to be supplied on a regular basis with the relevant data on how the school's resources are being deployed.

Effective councils accompany and support their principals in the work of improving pupil and staff performance through asking the right questions.

- Which groups of pupils are the highest and lowest performing, and why? What plans do school leaders have for addressing less-than-expected progress where this occurs? If matters do improve, how will we know?
- How is the school going to raise standards for all learners, including the most and least able, those with special educational needs, those who are more broadly disadvantaged, boys, girls, those of a particular social, cultural or linguistic background, and any who are currently underachieving?
- How is the school working to ensure that every student (regardless of their social background, gender, geographical location, etc.) can participate in a range of subjects?
- Is the school adequately engaged with the world of work and preparing its pupils for adult life? Do we know where our pupils go when they leave?
- Is the school confident that the expertise and skills of teachers and support staff are being used as effectively and efficiently as possible?
- Is this a happy school, with a positive learning culture? What's the school's record on attendance, exclusion, suspension, behaviour and bullying? What's being done to address any current issues? How will we know if our policies are working?
- Is the school offering a good range of sports, arts and voluntary activities? Is school food healthy and popular?

The value of such questions lies in their prompting the school to further reflect on and review its educational practices. Scrutiny triggers a dialogue of accountability linking stakeholder interests to the school's purposes.

15.

How do we work with the community?

Once you've discussed students, staff and parents, what's next is the stakeholders – the larger community, or all those outside groups that can affect the operations of the school or are affected by the operations of the school.

That's a lot of groups – far more than can be represented among community members of council, even if your school allows for these. Their presence on council is more a cue to ask of each decision, "Who will this affect?" and "What are they owed?" Some stakeholders – the state, religious institutions, the alumni – are going to be more important than others, and it's worth spending time on mapping them, foreground and background. Who should be consulted? Who needs to buy in? Who needs to consent? To whom is the council accountable?

Consider the subcommittee

Where councils have subcommittees, members of the wider community should be invited to participate. Subcommittees must have at least three members including at least one school council member. 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.

Source:
http://www.schoolgovernance.vic.edu.au/54-engaging-the-school-community-and-beyond

It's a two-way process: there needs to be a means of seeking the views of stakeholders, and there needs to be reporting back as to where their advice went and what happened afterward. Use newsletters, public forums, events and, particularly, social media. Put the council's papers – minutes, agenda, subcommittee reports (or at least summaries) – online wherever possible. You are not a secret society.

Council members should take every opportunity to promote the school to their own networks. Staff members should update staff meetings.

Social media is also a vital means of keeping in touch with your alumni, who are a significant source of extra support. American schools tend to be much better at this than Australian schools.

Ask yourself, to what extent have our school and, where appropriate, our council:

- Identified and assessed the existing school relationships, including with staff, parents/carers, other schools, a P-12 cluster, etc?
- Explored how the school is tapping into the skills and expertise of parents/carers?
- Identified what could be improved and strengthened (including council's two-way communication with the school community and stakeholders)?
- Developed a list of relevant groups, organisations, other schools, networks and people, and identified opportunities to engage around shared goals on education, youth development, community-based learning, etc?

Can new (or improved) partnerships be developed:

- With parts of the relevant department?
- With other schools?
- With the local council?
- With a forum involving local school councils, creating a local network of councils?
- With community organisations, local members of parliament, universities, colleges, health organisations, early childhood services, businesses, sports clubs, alumni, etc?

Can some/all council members keep in touch with key strategic partners?

Have we identified new community members to be represented on council?

Building partnerships

The council should also enquire about building partnerships, networks, and learning communities that support students' personalised learning.

A personalised, joined-up approach to student learning makes collaborative leadership and governance of a learning community fundamental to school performance and outcomes.

This community governance model pivots on building a learning community that is bigger than a school or what happens in the classroom. It reflects an ongoing shift from a tradition that locates learning and governance largely within the school, to schools, families and communities (local and, increasingly, online) sharing greater responsibility for students' learning and achievement.

The council then looks at how its planning, policy, partnerships and other work supports students in linking all aspects of their lives – learning, health, wellbeing and development.

This means that the council has to address the separation between the professional impacts of the teacher and the school, and the educational, social and cultural impacts of the home and community, by seeking to bring everyone together in partnerships and a wider learning community.

Some schools band together to share resources, which can add another layer of governance altogether, with joint committees and even local or regional agreements. This complicates matters, but the educational advantages of cooperation are so clear that it's probably worth exploring.

Reach out to the community.

16.

How diverse are we?

One of the reasons why we have councils is to introduce elements of the community into the work of the school. The school community isn't necessarily identical to the Australian community as a whole – every school has its own characteristics, its own vision, and its own audience. It's not a good idea, though, to set your sights too narrowly. If your school's students, council or staff are entirely unrepresentative of the general public that needs to be enlisted to support the school, you may have a problem – one that could get steadily worse.

What really matters is that inherent within the notion of an inclusive school is the powerful principle that it is both possible and desirable, for educational and broad societal reasons, for all children and young people, regardless of their circumstances or differences, to learn together.

In a more inclusive school, student forums may openly discuss the opportunities and challenges presented by diversity, harmony and conflict resolution as well as the further steps necessary in their school's continuing pursuit of the inclusive ideal.

Students in such a school may thus routinely learn from diversity; they may communicate and collaborate with others using intercultural and cross-class understandings and be especially well-placed to become future leaders and global citizens. In turn, these understandings can build and strengthen local communities and help to develop modern, inclusive societies.

Your educational plan should deal productively with a multilingual and multicultural student base, drawing on their strengths and helping them through their challenges.

Closer to home, how diverse is your council? What's its gender balance? Is it actively promoting outreach to Australia's newer communities, or the older ones? What's the age distribution?

Fresh perspectives

Diverse and inclusive boards can bring fresh perspectives to the way a school is governed. Governing boards are critical in setting the culture for equality and diversity to thrive. Having a governing board that is reflective of (but not representatives of) the community it serves can help them make better decisions in the interest of all pupils. They help governing boards to understand the cultural and religious context of the community, set an example about inclusion "from the top down" and demonstrate a commitment to their own diversity policy. New governors or trustees from under-represented groups also bring knowledge and a different perspective that can ensure the board does not succumb to "group think". It is important for governors and trustees to understand that they are not on the board to represent anyone or a particular group, but to use their own judgement to act in the best interests of all pupils at the school.

Source: *The Right People Around the Table*, UK National Governance Association, 2018

It's not simply a matter of warm inner glow. For one thing, diverse councils tend to work better than restricted ones. The advantages of greater diversity on councils in general, and not-for-profit councils in particular, has been established on a solid footing of evidence.

The observed advantages are:

- a wider range of talent, perspectives, experience and knowledge on the council
- expertise, engagement, innovation and credibility with, and for, communities
- culturally and socially inclusive teaching and learning
- good governance, ethics, robust decision-making, higher productivity and satisfaction.

Wanting a diverse council is one thing; finding diverse people from under-represented groups who want to be on council is another thing again, and will take both effort and flexibility. You will need to be absolutely sincere, and able to tell applicants why you want them, with reference to the school's educational outcomes. You may need to advertise within the relevant communities, in local languages, with views the communities will respond to. You may have to offer expenses, or training, or interpreting. You may need to explain what your governance involves, and why it's valuable.

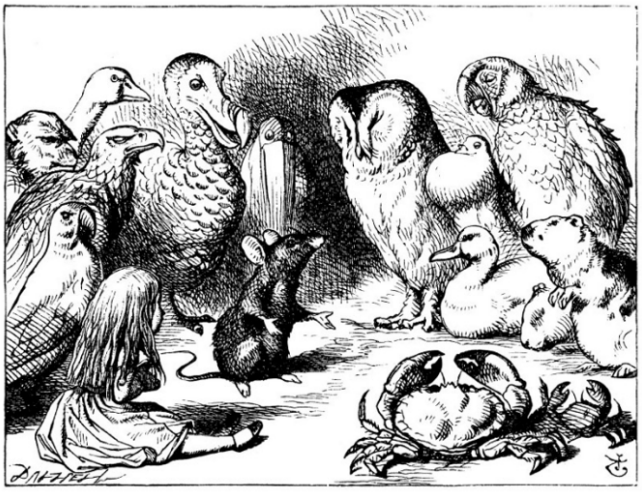
You may need to investigate where the barriers to engagement lie, and act to remove them. You will need to listen to concerns and complaints.

Look for cultural mentors in the communities you're targeting. Offer them a chance to participate in working groups or public forums. Think about employing translators for some key documents.

Unless your school has a commitment to diversity – a commitment, that is, to introduce change and recognise and respect other cultures – you're turning away from the future of our country.

Diversity is an educational issue, not simply a governance issue.

Schools may prioritise the development of their own inclusion policy (keeping it compatible with their state's, and their sector's, inclusion policy)[3]. Every council should know where its school stands on providing a welcoming environment for minorities, students with disabilities, and learners of varying sexualities; what resources are available; and where they may fall short.



Listen to alternative perspectives.

3 See, for example, Queensland's state inclusion policy.

17.

Are we doing the right thing?

Being a council member doesn't simply mean abiding by state and Commonwealth laws. People – and organisations – are also measured by their ethical standards. Some actions may fall within the law, but that doesn't necessarily mean they'll be accepted as "good" decisions by an organisation or by society in general. Ethics are inextricably tied up with public relations.

School councils are responsible to their stakeholders, including funders and private donors. All transactions, financial or otherwise, need to be transparent and consistent. It's hard to recover from a major hit to your reputation.

Avoidance of scandal, however, can go in two ways: promoting transparency, or driving cover-ups. Over and over, councils and boards themselves made up of law-abiding people have compounded with wrongdoers – embezzlers, offenders, or bullies – because to act against them would draw public scrutiny and damage the school's reputation. It is absolutely vital that the school has as an unbreakable rule that offences will be prosecuted.

It's extremely important to state the organisation's mission clearly, and to decide very early on what actions the school is prepared to take to achieve its goals. Is money from any source okay? Will you hire your facilities to any group and any person? Council members will confront many ethical issues during their term, and these decisions constitute a major part of deciding whether the council is working in the best interests of the school.

You can't prepare for every possible ethical dilemma that you and your school might face, but by implementing strict organisational guidelines and being clear about what is and isn't acceptable, you can broadly define what you and your group will and won't accept.

You need to be able to ensure that the culture of the organisation as a whole is healthy – that volunteers and staff will have a feeling for what's over the line and a willingness to speak up to get the school's practices adjusted where a problem has come up. Because you want this, it's absolutely essential that you have a council culture that asks itself meaningful questions about what's the right thing to do.

This involves a code of conduct, or it ought to. Possibly two codes – one for the council as an institution, another for you as a council member (see page 88).

A delicate balance.

Section two: the council member

The council is made up of individual council members, each of whom has responsibilities both as an individual and as a part of the collective body that is the council as a whole.

The council governs; I am a member of the council: so what, exactly, should I be doing in my role right now?

The difficulty, always, is defining what leadership by a collective body means in terms of the actions of any one individual.

Leadership doesn't have to reside in a single star performer or an institutional spokesperson. Leadership can be distributed among many people, either by splitting it into discrete sectors and parcelling it out through delegations or by drawing on the strengths of many people and assembling them into a recognisable whole.

Leading, for a council member, can be making sure that the chair does their job of checking out the draft plan presented by the head of the review team or planning subcommittee. That can mean asking the telling questions, pointing out the unintended consequences, and finding the error in the spreadsheet so that what comes out of the process is firm, reliable and meaningful. That doesn't necessarily involve marching up the front of the parade carrying a banner, but it's how you get from one place to another. There can be big, bold, Leadership with a capital L, or lots of smaller leadership initiatives, and obviously many kinds in between, and sometimes one is appropriate and sometimes the other.

The council, as a whole, can't lead unless its constituent parts – including you – are doing their job. And a council member's job, as we've discussed earlier, has two main aspects – the first to do with compliance, the second with performance.

Compliance

The compliance part of a council member's role revolves around their legal and financial duties. These duties include monitoring and signing off on budgets, checking that the organisation can pay its bills, looking through reports and identifying major risk areas, and doing what you can to minimise the effects of those risks. It involves:

- assessing that the school is performing effectively, efficiently and ethically in the interests of all stakeholders
- reporting this information to stakeholders
- using this information to inform future improvements.

Everybody on the council, without exception, has to do this. Council members must also ensure, through a process of internal review, that the organisation is properly conducting all its affairs.

Performance

The performance portion of a council member's role is strategic, and involves playing your part in:

- setting a vision, direction, purpose and goals
- developing plans, policies and strategies
- exploring and managing risk and opportunities
- supporting and promoting strong partnerships between all stakeholders and with the wider community
- examining the performance of the council itself to ensure that it's properly serving the interests of the school.

Here you're part of a team, and you do what you're good at and what you offer to do. Not everybody on the council does the same thing, and duties should be divided up in the most efficient way possible.

The good school council member – how do you measure up?

Essential attributes of the good school council member include being:

Committed

- Devoting the required time and energy to the role
- Being ambitious to achieve the best possible outcomes for young people
- Being prepared to give time, skills and knowledge to developing themselves and others to create highly effective governance

Confident

Of an independent mind, able to lead and contribute to courageous conversations, to express opinions and to play an active role on the board

Curious

- Possessing an enquiring mind and an analytical approach
- Understanding the value of meaningful questioning

Challenging

- Providing an appropriate challenge to the status quo
- Not taking information or data at face value
- Always seeking to improve things

Collaborative

- Being prepared to listen to and work in partnership with others
- Understanding the importance of building strong working relationships both within the board and outside it with executive leaders, staff, parents, guardians and carers, pupils, the local community and employers

Critical

Understanding the value of critical friendship which enables challenge and support

Self-reflective

Pursuing learning and development opportunities to improve their own effectiveness and that of the whole board

Creative

- Able to challenge conventional wisdom and be open-minded about new approaches to problem-solving
- Recognising the value of innovation and creative thinking to organisational development and success.

Source: *The Right People Around the Table*, UK National Governance Association, 2018

18.

How do I work with the other players?

A councillor's work is about people – working with them and learning from them. As a start, get to know your fellow members and what they have to offer. The point of having a council is to tap into and make use of a wide range of ideas, perceptions and perspectives.

Communication is key. What you want from the people you're talking with, and what they want from you, are:

- honesty, so you don't all waste time getting to the real point
- clarity, so you know you're both talking about the same thing
- respect, so you don't talk down to people and don't put up with being patronised
- information, so you know what you're talking about and can assess whether everyone else does
- tact, so that you don't give offence by accident.

All these qualities are valuable, although employing them is not always easy. Do the best you can.

The principal

Depending on the school and its structure, the principal can be employed by the council, or quite independent of it, or anywhere in between. Luckily, we don't have to deal with every specific variation, because one thing is true of every case: the legal relationship between the principal and the council is much less important than the human relationship. If what you have is a master/servant relationship, then things have gone badly wrong.

The principal administers the business of the school, yes, but also so much more than that. The principal is part ringmaster, part conductor, part impresario. The principal must have their own vision for the school, its growth, and its future, based on a deep understanding of its culture, its resources and its strengths, and of education and learning. You can't just read these things from the text of a council motion.

The relationship between principal and council must be a cohesive partnership, so get to know your principal.

If you want to know how a principal sees their job, look up the Australian Standard for Principals, and note

Principal as executive officer of the school council

The principal as ex-officio member and executive officer is responsible for:

- providing council with timely advice about educational and other matters
- preparing the council's agenda in consultation with the president
- reporting regularly to council about the school's performance against its strategic plan
- making sure that council decisions are acted on
- providing adequate support and resources for the conduct of council meetings
- communicating with the school council president about council business
- ensuring that new council members are inducted
- liaising with the department, through the relevant regional office, about school council related matters.

The principal is also an ex-officio member of all council subcommittees.

Source: **http://www.bssc.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/scgovernancequickguide.pdf**

the skills the role requires. If you're ever on the council when you have to replace a principal, or if you're on a council that has to review the principal's performance every year, it's a must read. It's also worth noting, though, that the standard has very little to say about working with the council – that's more or less taken for granted as a background to their leadership responsibilities.

It's also the principal's duty to provide certain services to the council. This involves preparing the meeting papers, getting them out to the members in good time before the meeting, answering technical questions with comprehensible answers, following up on motions, and working with the chair. If you think you're being starved of information, or swamped with detail, make your views known in council and try to work towards a solution.

And, of course, the principal is a member of the council, and has the same powers, duties, and responsibilities in that regard as every other member.

The teachers

Teachers are an essential part of the school's leadership community, lending their knowledge, skills, and experience to a collective consensus. They know, better than anyone, where the problems lie and what could be improved. They must be engaged, and should be supported. If they express any reservations about the school's progress, take them very seriously.

The parents

No parent can speak for all the school's parents, and parent representatives can't satisfy the council's need to communicate with the whole parent community. There may be parent associations tasked with specific activities – family engagement, community events, learning partnerships, fundraising, running the canteen – and these should have channels of communication to the council. You may want to have public meetings with the school community once or twice a year. Ideally, parents should be able to attend meetings of the council (though this may involve going into confidential session once or twice across the evening). The school's annual report should be circulated. For the school newsletter, the council could assign members to write pieces keeping everybody up to date with what's been happening. Ask whether the council minutes should be public, and how (such as being included – in whole or as a summary – in the school newsletter).

The students

The upside of having the views of students on council is that they won't have the baggage of tradition and habit that may constrict the views of more established groups, allowing them to think outside the box. The downside is that there's quite a lot they don't know that may take time to get to know. It helps if you can give them some out-of-meetings mentoring and practical coaching (but remember their time pressures).

Don't think that because you have a student on council you don't have to do anything else to engage the student body. Student reps can't shoulder the responsibility of representing every sector of every stream.

19.

What if we don't agree?

Most councils, most of the time, get along well enough. You're working for a common cause – you're all committed to the school's educational goals, and there's a starting assumption of universal goodwill. Get to know the other members – it helps if the council can organise some informal social contact between meetings. Disagreements occur, however, in even the most close-knit of groups.

No organisation is completely free from disagreements. Differences of opinion serve an important function in testing out ideas. If you have to argue for your proposals, debate helps identify the weak points and can lead you towards improved solutions.

The normal procedure for dealing with a disagreement on a council is relatively straightforward. You identify the issue, clarify the exact points in dispute, identify the partisans of each approach, give all viewpoints the opportunity to be heard, work out the consensus (or take a vote), record the outcome, and move on.

Sometimes, however, this doesn't happen and disagreements can blow up into conflict. Conflicts, as we shall be dealing with them here, are irreconcilable disagreements that move from arguments towards feuds.

Managing conflict

Differences of opinion may become conflicts when the side that doesn't win the vote won't accept the outcome. Ideally, every organisation combines a wide range of opinions with a willingness to accept the majority view and move on.

Persisting conflicts emerge when this process fails. If not handled properly, conflicts can divide a group to the point where it is unable to unite behind a single message or a common endeavour. Disputes can take up a quite unjustifiable proportion of everybody's time and effort, and can eventually destroy morale, threaten the mission, and undermine a community's unity.

Sometimes people just won't listen.

The president has the primary role in keeping interpersonal relations on the council civil, respectful, and productive. It's their job to make sure that everybody's voice is heard, that there's no intimidation or destructive conflict, and that the meeting reaches a resolution that everybody can live with, and all that without letting the meeting run over time.

A good council member respects the opinions of their fellow members, and takes anything they have to say in the best light, helping them to express their views as clearly as possible. He or she listens to what the other person has to say, doesn't interrupt, discusses principles and not personalities, and doesn't get offended by incautious remarks (and certainly doesn't make any).

Identifying existing and potential conflict

Serious conflicts arise when people will not accept the outcomes of the normal processes of governance. They are, that is, centrally concerned with legitimacy. A strong and well-managed council will have less trouble gathering clear support for its decisions and will have fewer problems with continuing disagreements.

The council president should anticipate possible disagreements and, where possible, act to reduce them.

If an issue can be seen in advance to have the potential for division, contemplate referring it to a subcommittee (either one of your standing committees or an ad hoc committee or working group) to have the different views talked through and their implications teased out.

Managing conflict requires appropriate policies and procedures and, more important than any of these, an organisational culture of understanding and tolerance. The council president should make it clear that debate should take place in an atmosphere of respect for the opinions of others. As far as possible, policy differences should not be personalised.

Managing disputes

Identify the implications of the conflict occurring

The president should determine whether the dispute has the potential to damage the school, either by a display of disunity or by the 'washing of dirty linen' in public.

By far the most likely situation is that such a dispute will be of no interest whatsoever to any person outside the

council. It may be the case, however, that while the actual facts are boring, they may be able to be distorted into something more offensive and more interesting. Some consideration should, therefore, be given in advance to crisis management procedures. It's likely to be the principal who's fronting up to the media, not the president; the president is the spokesperson for the council, the principal the spokesperson for the school.

Identify responsibilities within the conflict

The aim of the disputes resolution process is to resolve the dispute. While this sounds obvious, many people think that the aim is to establish fault and assign blame. This is emphatically not the case. It is seldom useful to pursue the history of any dispute back too far. Your task is to decide who needs to do what to remove the difficulty, and then to find ways to persuade them to comply.

Try to develop resolution strategies in consultation with the conflicting parties. If you can honestly look over the question impartially and say, "Hey, you're right, we should do that," then that's infinitely better than any dispute resolution process ever devised. Even if you think their idea is no better than yours, a bad peace is often better than a good war.

If you can't do that, the next-best way to settle a dispute is to compromise. Talk it through with a willingness to settle for less.

If that doesn't work, do it by the book. Have policies in place. Every school should have dispute resolution procedures in its rules.

And if *that* doesn't work (there's nothing magic about dispute resolution procedures; they work if people are prepared to be reasonable, and if not, they don't) then seek professional advice where needed, maintaining discretion and confidentiality.

The nature of internal conflicts – occasions, often, when small things become ferociously important and compromise begins to look like capitulation – is such that they invariably benefit from the participation of an unbiased outside observer.

A mediator may be called for, although in many cases no particular professional skills are required. Only in rare cases is legal advice useful.

Ensure the wellbeing of individuals and the council is considered when developing resolution strategies.

Avoid making the matter any worse. Be careful what you say, and read up on the law of libel. Don't say anything you can't prove. Ideally, don't say anything that's going to deepen divisions and cause even more ill feeling.

Promptly, appropriately and impartially implement strategies that respect the cultures of the parties involved

The first step, always, is to talk to the parties. Many people don't like doing this, because it can involve nasty scenes, and they prefer to try to clothe arguments in a structure of rules and processes that they think will make issues less personal. This almost never works.

If your dispute resolution procedures don't work, you have to resort to the powers given to majorities in the constitution. If you have majority support, and if you all think it's worth investing the very large amount of effort involved, and if it wouldn't be easier to wait till the next council election, you may be able remove people from the council, expel members, or vote off office bearers. There are different rules about this for different councils.

Allow sufficient time for the conflict to be resolved. Afterwards, learn from it and prevent it from recurring.

20.

Where's the money coming from?

Your school may have a fundraising committee to identify possible sources of income (can you rent out your carpark to a farmers market on Sundays?) and seek donations from the community. The fundraising committee certainly should ask every member of council for the names of any of their acquaintances who may be supportive of a properly targeted appeal. However, the council's role isn't fundraising as such.

Part of a council member's job is being an ambassador to the community, and part of any ambassador's job is to bring in business. That's your role as an individual member though, whereas the council as a whole has a broader overview.

A council has the wider role of overseeing general revenue – all the money the school brings in from government grants, fees, donations and miscellaneous sources. The principal supplies the council with a full breakdown of what's coming in from each stream, flagging any potential difficulties or weak spots.

Fundraising by supporter groups can have its own challenges. If any organisation is representing the school, the council must have the power to approve or reject, in advance, any initiatives it proposes. One issue that is quite likely to come up, for example, is whether the school will approve the once-popular-but-now-increasingly-problematic chocolate drive. School health policy may override fundraising practice. What do you sell in the tuckshop?

Note too that fundraising comes with a whole set of compliance issues, depending in each case on the kind of fundraiser, state law, and the risks involved, and council has to be satisfied that any working group has the expertise to stay on top of it all.

In exactly the same way, the council may have to approve the school's investment policy on, among other things, ethical grounds. Will you invest in tobacco shares? Coal mines? Banks that loan to coal mines?

A number of industries that were once in no way controversial are sliding into the zone where you have to have an opinion on them, one way or another. Where do you strike the balance?

The council also has to keep an eye on any and all parent charges – what's included, what's extra, what's required, and what happens if the parents can't find the money. Any payment should be clearly signposted, justified, and monitored.

The council's primary financial responsibility, though, is to see that the money coming in balances the money going out. When it comes to nightmare scenarios, the term "trading while insolvent" is right up there with "zombie apocalypse". It's also just about as unlikely, so we won't spend much time on it, but it's unlikely partly *because councils generally do their job properly.*

21.

Am I financially literate?

As a council member you need to be able to work with the school's financial reports. You have to be able to follow what the bursar is talking about and analyse the implications of changes in the numbers. Those numbers paint a picture of your situation that's as significant as your other performance measures, and one that's less likely to be distorted by hope or pride or vanity.

As a start, you have to know how people record and discuss financial matters. You have to understand the fundamentals of accounting, beginning with the financial statements that are going to appear in front of you.

You have to realise what the accounts are trying to tell you.

Balance sheet

The first thing you need to know is what the school has and what it owes – its assets and liabilities, and what's left when these are balanced up. For these, you look at the latest balance sheet – what is sometimes called the statement of financial position.

The statement of financial position is a snapshot of your school's finances at a particular point in time. That's where you're starting from. From now on, every transaction that takes place makes you better off or worse off, and you have to track the changes.

Profit and loss

Profit and loss (sometimes called the statement of financial performance) records how and why the figures change – the money coming in and going out.

To understand a statement of financial performance you'll need to know roughly what falls under each heading in income and expenditure. You'll need to compare actual spending with the budget that's been approved by the council. You'll need to check whether income is living up to expectations.

Further education

Explaining how to read a balance sheet could take a whole book in itself, and in fact it has: so at this point just put this down and pick up the free guide called *Damn Good Advice for Board Members*, also published by Our Community and Commonwealth Bank. For more detail yet, get *Damn Good Advice for Treasurers*. You can download or order them here:

https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/advice-guides/damn-good-advice-for-board-members

https://www.communitydirectors.com.au/advice-guides/damn-good-advice-for-treasurers.

If you don't understand, ask

It is essential that every board has at least one person with the skills to understand and interpret the full detail of the educational performance and the financial data available. These individuals should make sure that the board has a correct understanding of the school's performance and finances as presented and explained by executive leaders. They should identify from the data the issues that need to be discussed and addressed as a priority. Others on the board should learn from them and undertake training where this is needed to improve their confidence and skills in looking at and discussing issues arising from data.

While boards may decide to establish a committee to look in detail at performance data, everyone on the board should be able to engage fully with discussions about data in relation to the educational and financial performance of their school. If they cannot, they should undertake appropriate training or development to enable them to do so.

Source: **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/582868/Governance_Handbook_-_January_2017.pdf**

22.

What do the numbers mean?

To understand what the numbers in front of you mean, you can't just look at them one by one in isolation. You need also to consider the ratios.

A ratio is the proportion of one important number to another important number. You look at the ratios as well as the raw figures because this enables you to find out how things are shifting within the total picture. Your income may have gone up since last year, and the cost of fundraising may also have gone up; in that case, you'll need to look at the exact ratio of the two figures in each year, and between years, to see whether you're going uphill or downhill.

Once you've worked out a ratio you then have to ask yourself what it signifies. There's no automatic tick or cross, and every school has to work out its needs for itself. Deficits, for example, aren't always bad, and large asset bases aren't always good. Finance is only an aid (although obviously an important one) in achieving your vision, mission and goals, and everything has to be measured against whether it advances or constrains progress.

Not all of these ratios are necessarily going to be relevant for your school, and there may be others that are more important. We're not attempting to cover all bases here, just the ones that fit many groups.

School balance sheet ratios

	Ratio rising ▲	Ratio falling ▼
Income/ expenditure	Did you make money or lose money over the year? Did you make more than last year? You should be becoming steadily more efficient at what you do. Work out the surplus or deficit for the school as a whole and for all its component parts.	A negative balance isn't ever absolutely desirable, but it can be the right thing to do regardless. You may want to draw on your reserves to bridge a lean year, or to spend up big to take advantage of a rare opportunity, or to anticipate income that you expect to arrive shortly.
Assets/liabilities	There's no point in accumulating assets for their own sake – they have to support the mission. That said, there's never a bursar who wouldn't think that they'd rather have them than not.	If your liabilities are inching up, is there any risk that they'll come to affect the viability and sustainability of your enterprise? No school can afford to ignore the size of their buffer against hard times.
Debt/equity	You're increasing your leverage, taking on debt to build your capacity – ideally, to build your capacity to pay it back.	You're becoming more conservative in your management and possibly lowering your ambitions for growth and better outcomes.
Net surplus/total income	In a for-profit, this money is the point of the enterprise. For you, the surplus represents money you haven't yet managed to spend on achieving your mission. If your ability to employ the money is falling, this is a problem. Expand your budget so that you'll do more next year.	Your surplus is the only thing that can help you grow and develop, and the more there is of it the more you can grow. If your surplus is shrinking – or turning negative – review both your costs and your fundraising.
Beneficiaries surplus/income	Beneficiaries surplus is your net surplus less your admin costs – the money you have available to spend on your mission. If you've got more of your money available to spend on the mission that means you're bringing in more, or spending less – and other things being equal, that's good.	Are you pushing your staff towards burnout because you won't hire more people? Are you neglecting to build the infrastructure that would enable you to do more?
Income/unit of output	Are you managing to get more out of your money? Or are you having to run as fast as you can just to stay in the same place? What's the marginal cost of your next student?	Greater efficiency takes pressure off your fundraising requirements.
Overhead/unit of output	It's often been pointed out that administration costs have a tendency to creep up. It's your job to keep this tendency under control.	If you're actually managing to keep administrative costs down, good. Remember, though, that that there are limits; new developments may require large up-front costs.

	Ratio rising ▲	Ratio falling ▼
Annual income/ total assets	If your income is rising and your assets are staying the same, your financial productivity is going up and you're able to do more with what you have.	Even if your financial productivity is falling, this may be because it's necessary to assemble the resources that are needed to lift your productivity in other areas, but it's still something to watch.
Teacher costs/ admin costs	In itself, any given figure for this ratio may be showing you that you're understaffed or overstaffed (although a finance measure on its own tells only part of the story).	If administration costs are rising more than staffing costs, this may mean that you should check out your administration side. Is your cost control slipping?
Teacher costs per teacher	You may be rewarding people better, you may have to pay higher salaries to attract staff, or you may be suffering from salary creep, as the same staff make their way up the award. Check it out.	Are you doing more with less? Or is it that your funder won't cover the salaries of experienced staff, forcing you to rely on new graduates on short-term appointments? Check on your productivity.

23.

How do I get things done?

That's not the right question. The right question is "How do *we* get things done?"

You also have to develop the skills to get things done. There must be a road from the ideal to the practice. In practice, you need to be able to work with people. Here are a few tools.

Negotiation

Being a council member is a people thing. You can't get anything done unless other people agree with you and shape agreement together.

In schools you may have to do more negotiation than generally occurs in governments or companies. When you're working with volunteers you can't order them to do anything they don't want to do. You have to persuade people.

Negotiation happens when you need something that someone else has and there's no law that says they have to give it to you. You have something they want; they have something you want; you have to talk.

- **Know what you want; find out what they want.**
  Know what your advantages are, and what you have that they might want.
- **Look for the win-win.**
  Negotiation isn't a game. In a game, only one side can win. In a negotiation, it's often possible to sidestep the current disagreement by thinking creatively until you can find a solution that suits both sides. Look for alternatives.
- **Be agreeable, but not accommodating.**
  Listen more than you talk. Don't feel you have to say anything at all if the ball's in their court. Don't give away anything just to make them like you.
- **Go for the outcome, not for the win.**
  In a game, all that matters is who gets the trophy at the end. In the real world, what matters is what happens after that. If you get what you want out of the deal, don't get hung up about who gets the credit for it.
- **Don't get personal.**
  You're speaking for the cause here, which means that your ego isn't one of the negotiators. You're not "backing down", for example; you're maximising your possible gains in an unfavourable situation.
- **Be prepared to settle.**
  If the people you're arguing with had no power, you wouldn't be having this argument. If they have enough power to stop you getting everything you want, face the facts and make the deal.
- **Remain ethical**
  Don't lie, and don't renege on an agreement.

Effective meetings

Council meetings are designed to promote an exchange of ideas and information, resulting in sound, collaboratively developed and collectively agreed upon decisions. Well, that's the ideal.

The reality can be different, for a raft of reasons, including (but certainly not confined to) packed and irrelevant agendas, weak meeting structure, an ineffective president, or an underlying lack of clear purpose.

However, by far the biggest impediment to the smooth and effective running of a council meeting is the conduct of the participants themselves. Meetings are so important that Our Community has produced a book on this topic, *Making Meetings Work* (www.communitydirectors.com.au/books/making-meetings-work-conquering-the-challenges-and-getting-great-results).

You can improve your effectiveness at meetings through the following:

Know the procedures

Each council will conduct its meetings differently. Some follow a formal structure, others are more informal. Whichever style of meeting is chosen and agreed upon, it's important that you all understand it. Even more important is that you follow it and respect those who try to steer you back on the path when you stray.

Know your place

Keep in mind the respective roles and responsibilities of the council and the staff, and don't try to overstep your mark and wander off into operational territory.

Watch the clock

It shouldn't really need to be said, but it's surprising that some council members never actually manage to turn up to meetings on time. Punctuality is never so important as it is when you're serving on a council.

Punctuality is important.

Mind your manners

Again, it should go without saying that council members should uphold minimum standards of behaviour during council meetings. While engaging in vigorous debates is desirable, losing your temper isn't.

Do your homework

Your meeting agenda and background papers should be circulated a week before the meeting is held, so members can read them and be prepared before the meeting starts. A cursory glance at the papers as you enter the meeting room does not constitute good preparation. Follow up by doing further research if you need to clarify aspects of an agenda item.

Be flexible

Don't be scared to change your mind on an issue if the situation demands it. Remember, effective members always put the school before themselves – even if that means a slightly bruised ego.

Ask and keep on asking

A council meeting is no place for timidity. Experienced members agree that one of the most important things a council member can do is to ask questions and keep asking until you've got an answer that satisfies you.

Talk as well as listen

One of the most important qualities you can bring to a council is the ability to respectfully listen to and understand the contributions of others. However, making your own contribution is equally important. You've been invited onto a council because your experience, expertise and views are valued.

Timing is everything

It's important to contribute, but it's also important to make sure that your contributions are short, relevant and made at the right time – not 10 minutes after a vote on the issue has already been finalised.

Put your hand up

Being on a council isn't just about turning up to meetings, particularly if it's a smaller school you're serving. Join subcommittees (if your council has any) and be prepared to take your turn in volunteering to carry out special tasks between meetings.

Check and correct the record

Meeting minutes are the official record of the actions and decisions of the council and shouldn't be taken lightly. Make sure you read the minutes carefully (preferably while the meeting is still fresh in your mind) and attempt to correct any significant elements you consider unrepresentative. Don't sweat the small stuff, though – there's nobody so unpopular as someone who takes up half the meeting debating comma placement.

The role of the president

The president has their plate full. They have the primary responsibility for ensuring that affairs keep moving and things happen when they're supposed to.

The president is expected to lead effective meetings. Do note though that being a leader is not at all the same thing as being a boss. A president can't order any council member to do anything. If a member behaved as if the president's advice was an order they had to follow then they would be in breach of their obligations as a council member. Remember, you have to make your own decisions, without direction from anybody else.

A good leader, and a good president, will find out where everybody wants to go and strike a balance between that and where they need to go. The closer they get to the latter, the better they are. That's leadership.

24.

What does 'fiduciary' mean?

There are enormous amounts of material on the financial responsibilities of individual council members. As a general rule, you're unlikely to run into trouble if you're acting with the honesty and application that you'd expect from anybody else in that position, so we'll just give you a quick look at the high points.

Fiduciary duties

Upon becoming a council member, you'll be entering into a fiduciary relationship with, and therefore accepting a fiduciary duty to, the school.

The idea of 'fiduciary' comes from the Latin for 'faith' and 'trust'. Your fiduciary duty as a council member is at the basis of everything in governance – and includes:

Loyalty

Placing the school community's interests ahead of your own, or the interests of a particular group within the school community.

Care

Applying your skills, knowledge and diligence to council decisions and considering all important information reasonably available.

What matters in practice is how your decisions, relationships, and what you do (as individuals and collectively on council) pass (or don't pass) the fiduciary test. The table on the next pages may be useful.

Your duty is owed to the school – and that's to its continuing mission. This means that you must act in the interests of the school and not any other group – its students, or its teachers or parents – even if they elected you.

Key elements of fiduciary duty on our council	Do our discussions and actions pass the test?
Our duty of loyalty to the school community Council members ask who the beneficiaries are (everyone in the school community or some individuals or a group) of a decision that is made. This involves a duty to be loyal to the school community and to identify conflicts of interest. Practical questions to test undivided loyalty include: • Who would be affected and how (positively and negatively) by a decision, action or change? • Is the school community interest served? • Over time, who would *really* gain and who may miss out if something was changed? • Can these answers be quantified? If so, how? • Have conflicts of interest been identified? Even if the first test of loyalty is passed, loyalty in *appearance* and loyalty in *fact* are equally important. The perception (you're not seen as using your council membership to have a decision made that benefits you or the council) is as important as the reality.	
Our duty of care to the school community A council member should be properly informed about an issue before deciding something. This includes: • Fulfilling the duty of care before making a decision by considering all the information reasonably available (e.g. diverse opinions, data, and evidence) • Following a clear process and consulting with, when necessary, subcommittees, working groups, community members, staff or outside "experts" in making decisions • Assessing the information in an impartial, objective and neutral way • Assessing the risk of doing/not doing something (using, if necessary, a risk management tool)	
Thinking and planning ahead The vision and goals in the school's strategic plan inform decisions that serve the school community's interest. Questions to ask include: • Is the decision part of a broader strategy? Or are we just reacting to an issue or a problem in isolation from related issues? • How is this decision or change likely to benefit the school community in the longer term? • Is the proposal consistent with the vision or a goal in the strategic plan?	

Key elements of fiduciary duty on our council	Do our discussions and actions pass the test?
Our professional values and behaviour Ways to practise our fiduciary duty in a professional way, and to build strong relationships, include: • Acting in good faith in the best interests of the school • Valuing diversity of opinion, and viewing disagreement as an opportunity to learn more about an issue and to make a better-informed collective decision • Focusing on the issues, not the person; they're the glue that unites a diverse community and helps a council to be undivided in its loyalty • Distinguishing facts from what may be only speculation or assumptions • Listening with an open mind and really hearing what may be two (or more) sides of the story • Treating fellow council and school community members and staff with courtesy and respect • Speaking and writing without judging, blaming, naming or undermining • Using inclusive language, not language that divides people or creates suspicion and distrust • Building openness and transparency • Being honest • If there are major concerns, problems or conflicts, using appropriate informal and formal processes such as mediation.	

Conflicts of interest

A conflict of interest arises where someone's duty to act in the interests of the school is compromised by some other interest, whether that's personal or derived from some other organisation or special interest group. To give an obvious example, if a council is voting on upgrading the school's computer system, and your company – or your spouse's company – is being considered for the job, then a conflict of interest may arise.

The further you go from a straightforward direct financial conflict, the more excuses most people can find for their behaviour, and the harder it is to prove that someone's broken the rules.

What's your interest?

Private interests may be direct or indirect, as well as financial or non-financial.

Direct interests

Includes an employee or director's own personal, family, professional or business interests.

Indirect interests

Includes the personal, family, professional or business interests of individuals or groups with whom the employee or director is, or was recently, closely associated.

Financial interests

Involves an actual, potential or perceived financial gain or loss. Money does not need to change hands for an interest to be financial.

People have a financial interest if they (or a relative, or a close associate) own property, hold shares, have a position in a company bidding for work at the school, receive benefits such as concessions, discounts, gifts or hospitality from a particular source related to the school, or can benefit financially from a decision significantly influenced or made by the school.

Non-financial interests

Arise from personal or family relationships, or involvement in sporting, social or cultural activities.

They include any tendency toward favouritism or prejudice resulting from friendship, animosity, or other personal involvement with another person or group. If personal values are likely to impact on the proper performance of public duty, then these can also lead to a conflict of interest.

Source: Victorian Public Sector Commission

https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/ethics-behaviours-culture/conflict-of-interest/

Keeping yourself safe

As a council member, your first duty is to serve the school's interests, not your own or anyone else's.

If you encounter a possible conflict of interest or a possible perception of conflict of interest, notify the council immediately and provide it with information about the interest and where it might conflict with your role on the council. You should also avoid discussions that might influence fellow council members, and you shouldn't receive any council or internal papers that discuss the matter. Where the matter is raised in council meetings, you should leave the room. If you're forced to leave the room because of a conflict of interest, ensure a line is included in the minutes of the meeting indicating the reason for your absence. If it's impossible to resolve the conflict you may have to resign.

That said, it's not necessary illegal, or wrong, or improper for you to have dealings with the organisation, provided that the conflict is declared, that the decision is at arms' length and doesn't involve you, and that it's objectively in the best interests of the school. If you're the cheapest printer in town and you're coincidentally public-spirited enough to be on the school council, your school isn't compelled to lose money by taking a higher bid.

The best idea is for the council to actually develop a written and transparent policy to deal with conflicts of interest. This will help to ensure that everyone is aware of their responsibility to declare any interest and to quarantine council members from any decisions on matters in which they've declared an interest. See the Institute of Community Directors Australia online policy bank for a template policy: **www.community directors.com.au/icda/policybank/**.

However, in practical terms, just about everybody on a standard school council has great big conflicts of interest right up front. The parents are discussing things that apply to themselves and their children, the teachers are talking about their work, the principal is having their say on the matters they're paid to run.

And all this is absolutely okay, provided that what's being discussed is the students (say) as a whole rather than specific students as individuals.

Your ultimate guide always has to be what's good for the school. That means, among other things, that at some point or another you're going to have to separate yourself from your peer group of parents or teachers or students and look at the issue in front of you with detachment. You have to be open to argument; you can't be nailed down to a position in advance.

As a council member you mustn't have undeclared conflicts of interest, or trade while insolvent, or act negligently – but really, if you have to be specifically told not to break the law you may not really be suited to a place on a school council. The community expects more of you. That's why there are codes of conduct, or misconduct, which generally try to cover the areas that laws don't reach.

Because it's hard to particularise every violation, codes are typically vague, and, being vague, are easy to argue about and hard to enforce. You're trying to create a culture where good behaviour is encouraged and is practised without having to be enforced.

What is misconduct?

A failure to behave in the ways described in the code may be considered misconduct and in the most serious cases, depending on the school's rules and other guidelines, may lead to suspension or removal from office or the school council.

Some examples of misconduct include:

- verbal abuse or harassment of other council members or the chairperson
- constantly interrupting speakers
- interjecting or making derogatory comments at a council meeting
- speaking against council decisions within the community
- breaching confidentiality
- disrespecting the differing points of view posed by other members of the council
- demeaning or disparaging comments/emails with regard to other council members.
- failure to declare any conflicts of interest
- displaying behaviour that is inappropriate for adults entrusted to represent their school community and work towards desirable outcomes for the students in the school
- improper use of school council information.

The school council president and the principal should be mindful of council members acting contrary to the code of conduct within meetings or speaking against council decisions to members of the community. School principals should contact their regional office in the first instance to seek advice on how to move forward.

Source: Managing School Council Conduct, Victorian Government

https://regionalservicesgroup.createsend1.com/t/d-l-bjhjilt-yhkkydyhir-k/

25.

What's in it for me?

Any frustrations of being a council member are generally hugely outweighed by the satisfaction gained – otherwise one shouldn't do it. Most agree that while outsiders may see their contribution as selfless, the benefits derived from the experience usually outweigh the sacrifices.

- **Making a difference.** There can be few more satisfying experiences than being able to see the school's goals and vision come to fruition in the form of successfully completed projects. Contributing to the achievement of something you really believe in brings a form of satisfaction that may not be equalled in other areas of your professional life.
- **Gaining new knowledge.** Becoming involved in a school can open up whole new areas of interest, resulting in a greatly expanded appreciation for how schools are run and of the specific sector in which the organisation is operating. As a wise person once said, no knowledge is ever wasted.
- **Gaining new skills.** Successfully negotiating the challenges of the community sector can pose challenges quite distinct from those required in the commercial or government sectors. Learning how to overcome these challenges can allow council members to develop an entirely different, and highly useful, set of skills. Meeting and working with other talented people can also lead to a valuable expansion of skills.
- **Expanding your networks.** Often, people are invited to sit on a council because of their particular skills or attributes – and taking a seat alongside them at the council table can allow you to benefit from those attributes. Making connections through the development of relationships and friendships with other council members can have long-lasting positive personal and professional implications.
- **Putting yourself in context.** Often in the day-to-day grind of work and personal lives, it's easy to lose sight of what skills and expertise you actually have to offer the world. Joining the council of a school, and acknowledging your contribution to its success, can lead to a more finely tuned understanding of your own worth – and a realisation that what you have to say is just as important as anyone else's input.

- **Being inspired.** Most people know the buzz that can come from being part of an effective team. Working with like-minded, dedicated people, not for material gain but for the good of the cause, is another experience opened up to school council members. That passion, commitment and spirit of generosity can be difficult to find in other arenas.
- **Being included.** Participating in the community that the council represents also presents immense rewards. Serving on the council can put you in contact with people you may not have otherwise encountered. Getting to know your stakeholders, watching them live and work and participate, can be as exhilarating as any other experience you're likely to have.

Study after study has shown that joining a participative organisation can have huge benefits for your health and wellbeing. There's a large body of hard evidence that says how you fit into your community is just as important for your health as anything you do yourself. Exercising is good for you, eating well is good for you, but neither of them is as good for you as having a supportive network of family, friends, and colleagues to interact with.

People stay healthy if they have confidence in their friends and their work and their lives. Social bonds help us understand the world as coherent and meaningful. Schools foster social bonds.

Join in, join up! You'll live longer, in better health, and you'll be making a contribution that you can be proud of. Everybody wins.

Groups save lives

"Controlling for your blood chemistry, age, gender, whether or not you jog, and for all other risk factors, your chances of dying over the course of the next year are cut in half by joining one group, and cut to a quarter by joining two groups."

Source: Robert Putnam, "Social Capital Measurement and Consequences" (2001), *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2(1):41–51.

Section three: preparing for the future

You share responsibility for educating children and young people to deal with a rapidly changing world. You can't just order them to believe anything that's written on the whiteboard; they'll have to be flexible, agile, and ready to discard anything that's stopped working.

They have a right to expect the same of you.

So.

A last question.

Where do you go from here?

Orientation and ongoing training

The first part of this guide covered what you should expect to be filled in on when joining the council. If your school didn't give you an adequate introduction to your duties, one of your duties is to make sure that they correct that before the next candidate comes along. Council members don't necessarily have long terms in office, and it's important to get them up to speed as soon as possible.

Whether or not you had any formal training when you joined the council, part of your review process should involve asking whether the council (as a whole, or individually) needs further training to fulfil its duties. If your members have come on at different times from different streams under different procedures there could be value in getting you all up to speed on a common training program.

Auditing

Every school council should review its own performance against the mission at regular intervals (e.g. every couple of years). Try to structure your review to come up with an agreed diagnosis. Every part of this guide is a chance to identify what you should and could be doing.

Succession planning

As new challenges start queuing up, it may be time to make some changes to reflect your changing community and the school's changing priorities.

Once you've identified the tasks the board has to handle, you then have to ask whether your current board has the capacity to do them all. What gaps leap out at you?

Are the right people involved? Do you need any skills, or any perspectives, that aren't currently represented? We've included a board composition checklist on pages 85–87.

It's always a good idea to have a trial bench waiting – people who have been on council subcommittees or working groups, or done ad hoc assistance with projects. The secretary should keep a list, and council members should add names when they can.

Succession planning also covers maintaining the council's continuity. It's not unheard of for the entire council to step down together, leaving the new members coming in cold. This is to be avoided if at all possible.

If it does happen, follow up with the members of the previous council privately and ask them for more information.

Digital era governance

In general, the council is entitled to run its meetings as it pleases, and this means you can provide for members attending by phone or over the internet. There are some boundaries; the link has to be through "technology that allows that member and the members present at the meeting to clearly and simultaneously communicate with each other". You have to be able to talk at the same time, which rules out email and Facebook, and during the time allotted for the meeting, so you can't run a Twitter thread over several days. (Your constitution may provide for circulating motions, which would allow these technologies, but that's a bit different.)

New technologies have many other things to offer. You could promote accountability by putting the video of the council online (with provision for going into confidential session if anything particularly sensitive comes up). You should be circulating council papers electronically to members for comment before the vote. The school's web offerings should be under constant review to ensure that they display the shared vision and goals to the school community in a variety of ways.

Consider filling council positions through online elections, making it easier to reach your voting base and giving everybody more room to set out their platforms. Consider online polling to see where your community stands on current issues. Every school should put resources into a digital communication strategy.

You will increasingly be able to download data on the school's performance in real time. You will be able to access online training to cover gaps in your competence. You will be exposed to the opinions of millions of people, some of whom may have the answers you seek.

Collaboration and networks in education and schooling

Schools increasingly emphasise a more collaborative approach to education. In place of a stand-alone school, possibly in a win-or-lose competition with other schools, is an emphasis on strong clusters and networks of schools. A more collaborative approach may mean:

- building stronger links between the vertical parts of education (e.g. school clusters; primary and secondary schools working together to develop P-12 schooling; or learning communities involving TAFE colleges, universities or kindergartens)
- building horizontal links with the community (e.g. families, parents/carers, health agencies, workplaces, businesses, community organisations, and groups such as sporting clubs)
- sharing resources such as sport and performing arts facilities.

A council's partnership work

A school council's partnership work may include exploring what is being done currently and what could be developed further in:

- working closely with families and building home–school links
- working closely with health services and local workplaces
- sharing good practice in P-12 clusters and regional networks
- developing primary-secondary school links via middle years work
- partnerships with kindergartens and universities and colleges.

A school council may develop a partnerships policy and establish a team to help progress such work.

Some schools are working to create P-12 partnerships that involve a learning community or cluster of primary and secondary schools. A P-12 approach takes shape when primary and secondary educators and schools work toward a shared view of learning, and a seamless curriculum that involves the pooling of teachers' expertise and skills across the pre-school, primary and secondary sectors.

Key questions to ask include:

- What is P-12 schooling and what kind of P-12 schooling may work for us?
- What is the potential of P-12 schooling to improve learning outcomes for students?
- What is the relevance of P-12 schooling for all schools?

Governance in a cluster

There are various types of governance and collaboration across two or more schools:

- **A loose collaboration or cluster of schools.** Each school has its own council, but has representatives on a joint committee. The schools may work together towards some shared goals. There may be other sharing.
- **A 'soft' governance federation.** Each school has its own council. Some powers and responsibilities may be developed through a joint committee. There may be emphasis on shared goals through a joint plan.
- **A 'hard' governance federation.** There is a single council. It is shared by all schools. All schools share goals. Schools have separate budgets, but importance is given to pooling resources across the schools.

Such arrangements can break down some of the needless competition for enrolments. They enable the sharing of expertise, skills, resources, networks and good practice between schools. Any such initiative should be a 'bottom up' process that empowers members of the school community.

Wodonga Federation of Government Schools

Wodonga Federation of Government Schools is a locally led strategic collaboration providing a variety of learning and developmental pathways for 60% of Wodonga's school aged children and young people.

Member schools formalised their commitment to the Federation in August 2016 by signing a memorandum of understanding which outlines how the schools will work together and the governance arrangements.

The Federation consists of eight government schools (Wodonga Senior Secondary College [including Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre], Wodonga Middle Years College, Baranduda Primary School (PS), Melrose PS, Wodonga South PS, Wodonga West PS, Wodonga PS and Belvoir Special School) in the local government area of Wodonga.

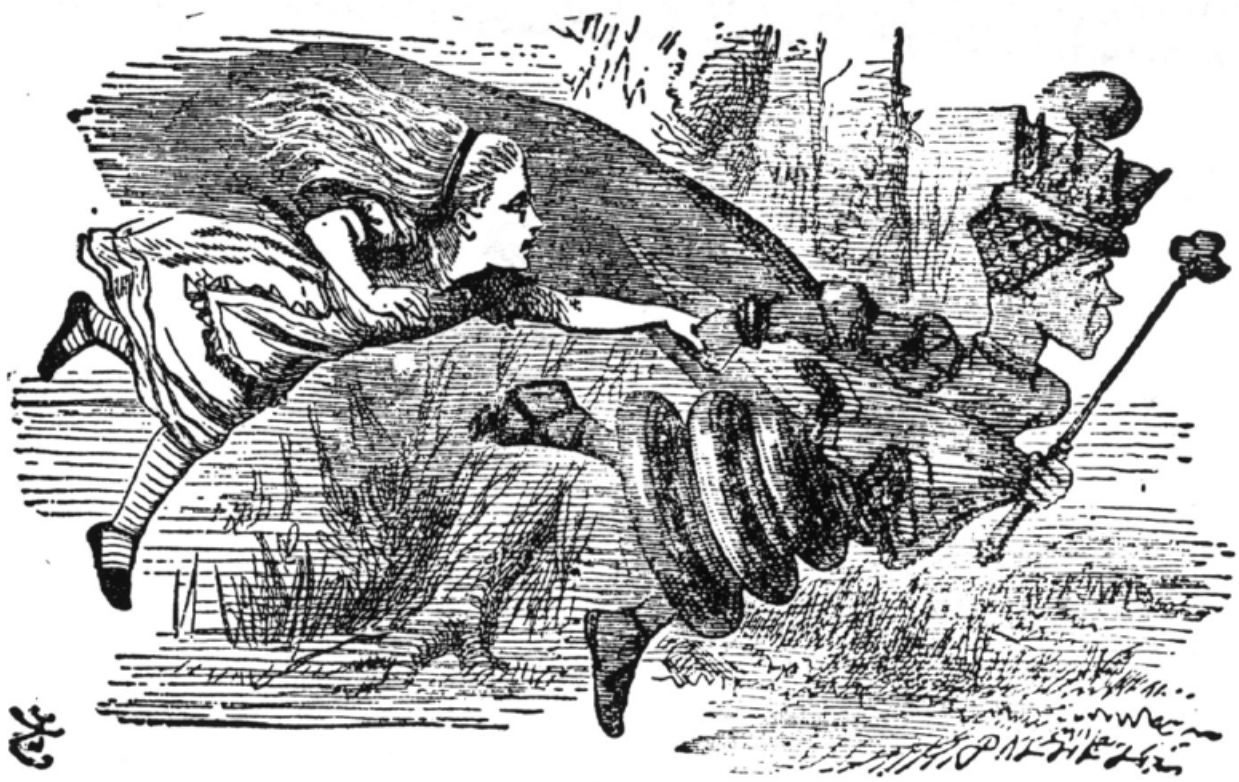
Each member school shares a commitment to the principles of education as outlined in the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 Sect 12.2; in particular, ensuring guaranteed universal access to education for all children and young people.

The Federation works collaboratively to achieve its goals through:

- developing a shared vision and working in unison
- mobilising resources, knowledge and expertise to support what works
- sharing accountability and creating opportunities for all children and young people
- enabling and enhancing strategies that work
- advocating for equity and policy / practice improvement and investments.

Source: **https://www.wodonga.vic.edu.au**

Keeping up



"Now, here, you see," said the Queen, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

Getting all this right isn't enough. Once you're up to speed (as a member, and as a council) on your digital strategy, community engagement and educational policy, technologies and communities and educational imperatives shift and change and you have to adapt. Even the best policies become gradually less effective from the moment they're written down. Flexibility is vital, and complacency is fatal.

Most important, though, is to keep a firm grip on your school's vision, which you will need to adjust to suit changing circumstances. Your task as a council member is to ensure that changes are made to take advantage of new opportunities rather than because your enthusiasm has flagged or your ideals have been compromised and you no longer reach for excellence. Compromise where you have to, detour where you need to, but keep your eyes on the prize.

It takes a village

The near-universal tradition of providing an education service has been to conceive the object of learning as the child in the classroom of a school detached from the community. Now the focus is on creating a more inclusive learning community embracing family and neighbourhood, with teachers, health and social workers collaborating to support all the learning needs of all children throughout their lives.

A broader range of learning outcomes is created to help young people realise their potential and improve their chances of succeeding in life. These are "be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic wellbeing".

Unless you address the all-round needs of a child within the family, within the community, you are not going to produce any lasting changes to many children, or to society.

There is growing recognition that these changes are re-describing not only frameworks of professional leadership but also governance.

What is being proposed here is the creation of a model of governance and accountability that reflects a very different conception of organising education, from the tradition which locates learning within an institution to one which makes the wider community responsible for developing education.

The emerging model of governance will turn governing bodies into leaders of the community, expanding the object of governance from the single school ("the silo") to the wider community. We stand at the threshold of a new phase of innovation to establish a coherent framework of school and community governance.

Source: "Towards a New Governance of Schools in the Remaking of Civil Society", by Stewart Ranson and Colin Crouch, published by CfBT Education Trust.

Every school is different, and every council is different. The only thing that's certain is that it's very difficult indeed to be consistently excellent. Here are some tips:

1. Wear the colours
Schools have their own cultures – all the things that aren't written down and that can't be documented. Plug into yours.

2. Work with what you've got
A tradition of excellence is an advantage, a resistance to change can be unhelpful – but they can both stem from the same school ethos. Remember, you have as much right to build on the school's traditions as anybody does.

3. Some days you win, some days you lose
You won't win them all. There are times when you'll propose a course of action and have it vetoed by the principal, or the council, or the market. Don't take setbacks too personally. Keep calm and carry on.

4. Know your own value
Don't let anyone take you for granted. Speak up. Fight for your corner. Stand your group.

Look at your school. Think of the great things that it does. Think of how much all that owes to what you and others do.

Feeling encouraged? Inspired?

Good. There's a lot more to be done tomorrow.

APPENDIX 1:

Online resources

Each state and territory (and each country) has a variety of websites explaining how the different kinds of councils operate. Look at your own state's resources, but don't neglect the experience of other places.

Australian Capital Territory

Education Act 2004

School Board Handbooks
https://www.education.act.gov.au/public-school-life/get-involved-in-your-childs-school/school_boards

New South Wales

Education Act 1990

P&C Associations
www.pandc.org.au/

Catholic Schools NSW
www.csnsw.catholic.edu.au/governance/governance-training/

Association of Independent Schools of NSW
www.aisnsw.edu.au/school-leaders/governance

Northern Territory

Education Act 2015

Guide to Governance, Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations
www.ntcogso.org.au/sites/default/files/uploads/files/2018/NT%20COGSO%20Guide%20to%20Governance_WEB.PDF

School Representative Bodies
www.ntcogso.org.au/school-representative-bodies

Queensland

Education (General Provisions) Act 2006

Department of Education School Council Handbook
https://education.qld.gov.au/parents-and-carers/parent-participation/school-council-handbook

School Councils Qld
http://schoolcouncilsqld.com.au

Catholic School Boards
www.bne.catholic.edu.au

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ)
https://www.isq.qld.edu.au

South Australia

Education Act 1972

Government schools and pre-schools governing councils
www.education.sa.gov.au

South Australian Association of State School Organisations Inc
www.saasso.asn.au/

Tasmania

Education Act 2016

School associations
www.education.tas.gov.au

Online learning module dealing with school associations' roles and responsibilities
http://tas-education.org/tasso/school-association-roles-and-responsibilities.1.html

Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations
www.tasso.org.au/

Tasmanian Catholic Education Office
http://catholic.tas.edu.au/

Victoria

Education and Training Reform Act 2006

Great Governance, Great Partnerships: A guide for school councils
www.ourcommunity.com.au/files/COM0216_SCHOOL_GOVERNANCE_NETWORK.pdf

Improving School Governance
https://www.education.vic.gov.au/PAL/school-council-improving-school-governance.pdf

Independent Schools Victoria
www.is.vic.edu.au/

Governance in Victorian Catholic Primary Schools
www.vacpsp.org.au/

School Councils in Government Schools
www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/school-councils-government-schools

Western Australia

School Education Act 1999

Education Department
www.education.wa.edu.au/school-councils-boards

National

Australian Education Act 2013
www.education.gov.au/australian-education-act-2013

Catholic School Governance
www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/resources/publications/8-catholic-school-governance-may-2002/file

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority
www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/research

International

United Kingdom

UK Department of Education Governance Handbook
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65e9dd6c62ff489bab87b2b3/_WITHDRAWN__Governance_Handbook_FINAL.pdf

Being Strategic: A guide for governing boards
www.nga.org.uk/Guidance/Workings-Of-The-Governing-Body/Governance-Tools/Framework-for-Governance.aspx

National College for School Leadership: The importance of the relationship between the chair and the head teacher
www.nationalcollege.org.uk/cms-sih-op-collins-knight.pdf

Canada

Ontario Ministry of Education: School councils: a guide for members
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/council/council02.pdf

Canadian Education Improvement Commission: School improvement planning: a handbook for principals, teachers, and school councils
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/sihande.pdf

New Zealand

Tomorrow's Schools Review
https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/tomorrows-schools-review/

Ethics

Victorian Public Sector Commission Codes and Standards: Code of Conduct for Directors
https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/resources/code-of-conduct-for-directors/

APPENDIX 2:

Board composition checklist

Board composition checklist

	Current members	Ideal board
Diversity		
Aged under 18		
Aged 19–34		
Aged 35–50		
Aged 51–65		
Aged over 65		
Male		
Female		
Indigenous		
Non-English-speaking background		
People with a disability		
Other (specify)		
Connections		
Community		
Education		
Media		
Political		
Philanthropy		
Business		
Social services		
School's client group		
Other (specify)		

	Current members	Ideal board
Skills		
Meetings		
Fundraising		
Budgeting		
Planning		
Other		
Qualities		
Ability to work co-operatively		
Leadership skills		
Sense of humour		
Commitment to the school's mission		
Ability to donate		
Areas of expertise		
Administration and management		
Entrepreneurship		
Accounting		
Banking and investment		
Education		
Fundraising		
Government		
Law		
Marketing, public relations		
Human resources		
Strategic planning		
Buildings (architects, engineers, builders)		
Technology		
Social media		
Other (specify)		

APPENDIX 3:

Code of conduct for school councillors (Victoria)

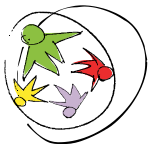
School councillors must abide by the code of conduct for directors of Victorian public entities issued by the Victorian Public Sector Commission.

The code of conduct is based on the Victorian public sector values and requires councillors to:

- act with honesty and integrity (be truthful, open and clear about their motives and declare any real, 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 foremost in their minds)
- 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 never 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)
- comply with relevant legislation and policies (know what legislation and policies are relevant for which decisions and obey the law)
- notify the school council if they become a candidate for an election in any state, local or federal election (not use the council's resources in connection with their candidature)
- demonstrate leadership and stewardship (set a good example, encourage a culture of accountability, manage risks effectively, exercise care and responsibility to keep the school strong and sustainable).

Source: **www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/management/codeconduct.docx**

INSTITUTE OF
COMMUNITY DIRECTORS
AUSTRALIA
▸Knowledge ▸Connections ▸Credentials



an enterprise of:
ourcommunity.com.au
Where not-for-profits go for help

The Institute of Community Directors Australia (ICDA) is Australia's best-practice governance network for not-for-profit boards, committees, councils, schools, and their staff.

An Our Community enterprise, ICDA delivers information, tools, training, events, qualifications and credentials to not-for-profits of all kinds. Our Community is a pioneering social enterprise that services the needs of Australia's 600,000 not-for-profit groups and schools. See more about Our Community's history, vision and work here: **www.ourcommunity.com.au/aboutus**

What we do

Training

We offer a wide array of training to suit your level, time and budget – including webinars, self-paced online training, in-house training services and other special events.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/training/home

Diploma of Governance

We are proud to offer a Diploma of Governance, which has been designed for the board members of Australian not-for-profit boards and committees, and the CEOs and other senior staff who work alongside them.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/training/diploma-overview

Tools and resources

Whether you need to know more about starting up a not-for-profit organisation, have just landed your first role as a board member, or you're looking to take your directorship to the next level, our tools and resources will help you get your head around the basics.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/tools-resources/home

Policy Bank

A bank of policies that are free for any not-for-profit organisation to download and use, so long as it is for a non-commercial purpose and that the organisation is not paying a consultant to carry out this work.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/tools-resources/policy-bank

Board positions service

A place to both find and advertise board positions - for free.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/board-positions

The Community Advocate

The source for not-for-profit sector news, views and issues. Subscribe for free.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/news

Community Directors Intelligence

Our monthly leadership publication contains great guidance for not-for-profit leaders. Subscribe free, plus get alerts about training, resources and events.

www.communitydirectors.com.au/newsletters

Institute of Community Directors Australia

The Institute of Community Directors Australia (ICDA) is the best-practice governance network for the members of Australian not-for-profit and government boards and committees, and the senior staff who work alongside them – providing ideas and advice for community leaders.

communitydirectors.com.au

22384/0516