IMPROVING SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

SCHOOL COUNCIL PRESIDENT
5.0 Introduction

Goal

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

• their role and responsibilities as a school council president
• what makes a school council effective
• how to lead school council meetings
• how to engage the community in the support of the school and its objectives.

Overview

The school council president is a parent or community member (not a Department employee) who serves as chair of school council meetings. All members of school council elect the president annually.

The school council president must be able to run effective meetings, work effectively with all school council members and with the principal lead the development of the broad direction and vision of the school. An effective president is a key component of a cohesive school council. The president needs to understand the responsibilities of the role and the structure of government schools, and to have a constructive working relationship with the principal, other school councillors and the community.

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

This training module will help those people elected president of their school council and those aspiring to the role of president to understand the extent of the role and to develop the skills and knowledge to perform their responsibilities successfully.
Why is this topic important?

All members of school council should know and understand their roles and responsibilities, and the functions and objectives of the school council, particularly the president. The president, with the principal, provides leadership, establishing the environment in which school council can operate effectively.

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

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

The role of the president requires, in particular, leadership and management skills.

An effective president is assertive, neutral, task-focused, and aware of the big picture. A good president knows the boundary of their authority, and the authority of the school council as a whole, and is able to keep confidences. A good president knows when to delegate.

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

Before nominating for president, a candidate should consider what they could bring to the position. Do they have an understanding of the school, its direction and its needs, or the time and willingness to learn this? Do they have the patience and commitment to develop relationships?
Role of the president

The school council president has a strategic role to play in representing the vision, mission and purposes of the school. The president ensures school council fulfils its role and functions. As the chair of council meetings, the president ensures relevant matters are discussed, that there is full participation at meetings and that effective decisions are made.

The president’s duties include:

- developing and working with the community towards a shared vision for the school
- being an effective spokesperson and advocate
- chairing meetings of school council
- representing the school in public forums with the principal
- promoting the school and the principal to the community.
The principal
As executive officer of the school council, the principal 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.

The principal is an ex-officio member of all council sub-committees.

The school council president
The role of the school council president is to:

- effectively chair school council meetings (ensure that everyone has a say in meetings and that decisions are properly understood and well-recorded)
- be a signatory to contracts, the school strategic plan and financial accounts
- together with the school council, endorse the school self-evaluation, terms of reference for school review, the school annual implementation plan and school annual report to the school community
- attest to school compliance with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority registration requirements
- preside at the annual public reporting meeting
- ensure council stays focused on improving student outcomes
- with the principal, be council’s spokesperson and official representative on public occasions
- when votes are tied, have a second or casting vote.

The school council president is an ex-officio member of all council sub-committees.

At times of principal recruitment and selection, the president or his or her nominee is a member of the principal selection panel appointed by the school council.
Building relationships

The school council president needs to build strong working relationships with the principal, other councillors and the community. The president supports the principal in their role.

Taking the following steps can help build the relationship between president and principal:

• upon being elected, meet the principal to discuss key aspects of the school
• develop a shared understanding of the school’s direction and its priorities, as stated in the school strategic plan
• arrange to meet the principal on a regular basis ahead of every school council meeting to discuss the agenda, issues to be tabled and any background information that needs to be circulated
• ask the principal to keep you informed of school matters that may affect school council and the community
• keep the principal informed of community matters that may be relevant to the school
• introduce the principal to key members of the school community as necessary, particularly if the principal is new to the school
• be available if the principal needs to discuss matters relevant to the school
• understand the role of the principal and those matters of the school that are operational and therefore not the responsibility of the council
• keep confidences shared by the principal.

Taking the following steps can help build the relationship between the president and other school councillors:

• be a good listener and ensure all councillors have the opportunity to be heard
• be willing to meet individual councillors to understand their particular situation
• encourage new councillors to be active participants at meetings and delegate council tasks to members
• welcome new councillors.

New councillors are briefed on existing school issues and processes. It is helpful to provide new councillors with a background information package which may include:

• school strategic plan
• annual implementation plan
• council Standing Orders
• code of conduct for school councillors
• current school policies (or where to access them)
• minutes of last council meeting
• list of common acronyms used in education
• council members phone numbers and email addresses (with consent of the members)
• folder or binder in which to file council paperwork.

Taking the following steps can help build the relationship between the president and wider school community:

• whenever possible, attend school events such as music concerts, art exhibitions and athletic sports and be prepared to talk to staff, students and families
• with the principal, consider whether it may be useful to meet local government officers and the local Member of Parliament.
5.2 Characteristics of an effective school council

Why is this topic important?

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

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

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

The importance of good governance

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

Good governance relies on the professional leadership of the principal, the president, the school council and the establishment of effective meeting procedures.

In an effective school, school council processes are characterised by a mutual sharing of information, knowledge and ideas. There is a focus on dialogue in which all members are able to exchange information, share experiences, express perspectives, pose questions, clarify viewpoints, explore relevant research and develop a shared vision and way forward.
What makes a school council effective

An effective school council is one that:

• focuses on improving student learning outcomes
• involves the community in conversations about key issues and challenges on education
• is actively involved in the development of the school strategic plan
• promotes meaningful parent and community participation and actively seeks the views of its community
• has a clear understanding of its roles and responsibilities
• includes members who represent the diverse views of the school community
• has clear and consistent process for decision-making
• maintains high ethical standards
• has members with trust and respect for one another
• evaluates and communicates with the school community about its activities
• regularly reviews and evaluates its own performance
• trusts and delegates to individuals and its own sub-committees
• devotes time to its own growth and development, through induction and training.

An effective school council should support the development of strategic partnerships to help the school achieve the goals set out in its school strategic plan. For example, council members should consider and discuss opportunities to work with organisations outside the school in areas such as fundraising and facilities development.

It is good practice for school council to establish Standing Orders to assist in operating effectively and efficiently. Standing Orders should be reviewed each year following completion of the election process.

The Education and Training Reform Regulations 2007 sets out certain legal requirements in relation to the operation of school council meetings. These requirements cannot be overridden by the Standing Orders determined by a school council. In addition to these legal requirements, school councils are also encouraged to provide additional guidelines which might cover agendas, meeting etiquette and length of meetings.
Roles of school council members

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

There is no legal requirement for school council to have a vice-president, but many do. The vice-president can act as chair of meetings when the president is absent if elected by the school council at the meeting. The vice-president is also a non-Department employee.

It is good practice for a council to elect a treasurer who should also be a non-Department employee.

All school council members have a responsibility to:
• come prepared and ready to contribute at school council meetings
• attend school events and seek to understand the school’s operations
• support the school council president and the principal
• actively promote the school to the community
• comply with the code of conduct for school councillors.
Features of an effective school council are included in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Detail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An effective council works together</td>
<td>The council should be seen by all members as being greater than the sum of the individuals it comprises. Discussions may be lively however the council’s decision overrides individual opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members set aside their own special interests</td>
<td>Members add value through personal skills and experience, but must be prepared to set these aside for the good of the overall situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council offers strong support to the principal and school</td>
<td>Council members should ask searching questions and provide relevant, constructive criticism; however they should avoid sharing negative perceptions and gossip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council stays focused on its objectives and functions</td>
<td>Council members understand their responsibilities as distinct from those of the principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council is led by a strong president</td>
<td>Council elects a strong and capable individual to be its president, one who will have the respect of the principal and the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An effective council thinks strategically</td>
<td>Decisions and actions reflect and support the future directions of the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real discussions are followed by real decisions</td>
<td>Council members attend meetings in good faith, having prepared carefully and are ready to contribute. Differences are left at the discussion table and decisions acted upon promptly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council builds trust in its community</td>
<td>Council develops a record of trust through its responsible actions and good communication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Resources and links

- **Education and Training Reform Act 2006**  

- **Victorian Public Sector Commission Codes and Standards - Director’s Code of Conduct**  

- **School Policy and Advisory Guide – School Councils**  

- **School Councils**  
5.3 How to run effective school council meetings

Why is this topic important?

The key to an effective school council is the conduct of its meetings. There must be at least eight meetings a year and at least one every term. The school council president, as the chair, is responsible for the conduct of the meetings.

Many school councils have sub-committees and working groups that also meet regularly. Their conduct should be no less effective than those of school council.

At the end of this unit, participants should be able to:
- recognise the features of an effective meeting
- be confident in chairing successful school council meetings.

Features of an effective meeting

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

For effective and accountable decision-making in meetings there needs to be:
- clear definition of how the council conducts its business as outlined in the Standing Orders
- a carefully prepared agenda
- papers relevant to particular items on the agenda circulated in advance
- an expectation that all members will prepare adequately for the meeting.
- frank and open discussion
- accurate, timely records of decisions
- ability and willingness to seek independent and external professional advice when necessary
- a structure that enables much of the work to be done in sub-committees if this structure is used by council.
Decision-making

Decisions of school council are made by a majority of the members eligible to vote and present at the meeting, provided the majority are non-Department employees and not less than one half of the members currently holding office are present. All decisions of council are voted upon. The numbers for and against should be recorded in the minutes. The principal is a voting member. Where votes are tied, the chairperson has a casting vote. All motions must be recorded. The motion mover and seconder, and the outcome must be minuted. There is no provision for proxies to vote on school council matters at a meeting.

Setting the agenda

The principal in consultation with the president should set the meeting agenda with enough time to distribute it to all members of school council, along with any reports or background material prior to the meeting. As executive officer of council, it is the principal’s responsibility to ensure council members are suitably resourced. The agenda lists business that council will discuss during the meeting. A simple agenda may include:

- welcome and apologies
- minutes of the previous meeting (voted upon)
- business arising from the minutes
- principals report
- reports from sub-committees including finance sub-committee
- general business
- correspondence (incoming and outgoing)
- close.

If a council does not have sub-committees, the finance and other reports may be introduced by the principal. Many councils ask members to submit items for general business ahead of the meeting so they can be included on the agenda. It is for the president to determine if general business matters raised at the meeting, that are within a function of the school council, will be discussed. There may not be sufficient time for the discussion. The president should decline to discuss any matters unrelated to a function of the school council.

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

- Does the item fit within a function of the council?
- Is the item operational (and thus a responsibility of the principal)?
- Can the item be dealt with elsewhere?
- Does the item warrant council’s time?
Chairing the meeting

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

- have a good understanding of the constituting Order of the council, the code of conduct for school councillors and the standing orders of council
- have sought a briefing with the principal ahead of the meeting on any complex or sensitive issues
- manage the discussions during the meetings to ensure business is expeditiously addressed. For this, the chair must understand the powers of the chair and be willing to use them judiciously to ensure that council keeps to the point. These powers include the authority to bring discussions to a conclusion and bring on a vote
- ensure that no councillor dominates a discussion and encourage all councillors to express an opinion
- before calling for a vote, summarise points made in the discussion
- be prepared to delegate contentious matters to individuals or sub-committees for more research or discussion
- keep an eye on the scheduled closing time of the meeting and try to pace the discussion to complete the business by that time
- call for a specified extension of time if that is required
- ensure that councillors know the date, time and venue of the next meeting before officially declaring the current meeting closed
- ensure that the decisions of the council are correctly recorded. When council approves the minutes, the chair presiding at that meeting signs the minutes.

Stages of the meeting

School council meetings should follow a consistent format.

Minutes of the meeting

Accurate minutes should be made of every meeting of school council, and of its sub-committees. Minutes form a record of the council’s activities and decisions and reminders of actions that need to be taken.

Councils should appoint a minute-taker at the beginning of each year. If this person is not a member of school council, they should act as a silent observer without voting rights.

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

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

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

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

Some school councils will at times have members expressing strong conflicting views. There may be occasions where individual members are not working cooperatively with other councillors. It is for the president to manage any conflict or conduct issues that arise during the course of the meeting.

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

Some strategies for the chairperson dealing with difficult situations include:

- dealing respectfully with all comments and contributions
- using clearly understood protocols to ensure all voices get a say
- stopping one individual dominating the meeting
- bringing the discussion back to school council’s core objectives – assisting in the efficient governance of the school; ensuring that its decisions affecting students of the school are made having regard, as a primary consideration, to the best interests of the students; enhancing the educational opportunities of students of the school; and ensuring the school and the school council complies with its legal obligations
- delegating the discussion to a sub-committee, or to a future meeting of school council
- anticipating matters that might result in conflict between members and introducing them in a way to minimise tension
- being prepared to let an aggrieved council member express their view, but then being prepared to shut down the debate
- reminding members of the code of conduct for school councillors
- not taking sides and treating an individual’s grievance as legitimate.

The school council president should be mindful of council members acting contrary to the code of conduct or speaking against council decisions to members of the community. The principal and the president may need to meet the individual separately and remind them of their obligations under the code of conduct.

Resources and links

Victorian Public Sector Commission Codes and Standards - Director’s Code of Conduct

School Policy and Advisory Guide – School Councils

Making the Partnership Work

School Councils
5.4 Engaging the school community and beyond

Why is this topic important?

The work of school council needs to be known and understood by the school community, including families, students, staff and other stakeholders. If the community shares the vision and values of the school council and has participated in their framing, then it will offer greater support.

Council should have in place ways of communicating its decisions to the community, to enable consultation and receive feedback.

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

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

School council members are drawn from the key stakeholders in the school: the parents, the staff and the wider community. As individuals they bring diverse views to council but work together to develop a shared vision for the improvement of student outcomes. Council decisions affect the school and its stakeholders, and they generally need to be known and understood.

Minutes should be taken of every school council meeting and determined by the council to be a fair and accurate record of the meeting. Minutes serve as a record of all decisions, however they are not public documents.

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

There are a few channels the principal can use to report to the community about the operations of the school council. These may include:

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

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

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

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

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

The president as spokesperson

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

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

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

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

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

School council should be prepared to consult with the school community and, as needed, with the local community. School council is legally required to inform itself and take into account any views of the school community for the purpose of making decisions related to the school and its students. There are some issues, such as the school dress code, into which the school community must have input.

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

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

Community forums or focus meetings allow for all interested community members to contribute to school council decision-making.

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

Other ways of consulting the community may include:
- inviting specific individuals to a meeting to provide information or expertise to assist the council
- online surveys.

Where councils have sub-committees, members of the wider community should be invited to participate. This can be an excellent introduction to the work of school council. Sub-committees make recommendations to council, so it is an opportunity for opinions and ideas to be voiced. Sub-committees must have at least three members including at least one school council member.

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

Engaging the community

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

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

The aim of such approaches is to engage the community in school council work and directly reflect this input through the decision-making process. The result of such actions is a greater belief and confidence by the community in its school council.
Addressing concerns and complaints

A president is likely, from time to time, to receive a complaint about the school, either verbally or in writing. Depending on the nature of the complaint, the following steps can be taken:

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

- If the matter relates to the operation of the school, for example a complaint regarding a teacher, a class structure, bell times, or similar, the complainant should be advised it is not a school council matter and to approach the principal to discuss the concerns. The principal would then provide advice or action from that point. A written complaint should be noted on the meeting agenda as incoming correspondence with no further action required from the council.

- If the complaint is about the principal, the complainant should be advised to contact the regional office.

Many complaints arise from miscommunication or lack of communication. Taking care with all communication from the council may reduce complaints.

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

When dealing with complaints, the principal and the school council president must be mindful of confidentiality and privacy.

The Department requires that schools develop policy and procedures to address parent complaints. This policy should be developed in collaboration with parents and the school community so that it responds to the nature and complexity of the complaint.

Resources and links

School Policy and Advisory Guide – School Councils

School Councils
Handout A1

How effective is your leadership

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>Always</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I meet the principal before every school council meeting to discuss the agenda and other issues of concern.</td>
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<td>2. I make myself available to the principal and the school whenever needed.</td>
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<td>3. I am open and candid in my dealings with all council colleagues.</td>
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<td>4. I support all council colleagues and ensure they are heard at council meetings.</td>
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<td>5. I look for opportunities to build relationships with others in the local community, particularly influential individuals and groups.</td>
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<td>6. I understand and refer to the school council code of conduct and Council Standing Orders at every meeting.</td>
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<td>7. Our school council meetings are conducted according to Standing Orders and always run to time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Our school council minutes are a true and accurate record of our meetings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I make it my business to report back to the school community after every school council meeting.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

10. Three things I might do to increase the effectiveness of my leadership are:

a)   

b)   

c)
### Handout B1

**Scenarios for school council presidents**

As president, how do you handle these situations?

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

As president, how do you handle these situations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Your council has been considering a contentious issue for several meetings. Finally a motion has been put and the voting sees five votes for and five votes against. As president and chair, your vote went for the affirmative. Now what do you do?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The finance sub-committee has recommended that council not renew the council’s contract with the current cleaners. It recommends the school should hire a new cleaner, who is the brother-in-law of the principal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. School council decides it is time to review the school dress code and sets up a working party to consider this. Policy states the community must be consulted on changes to the dress code. How should you proceed?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. As president of the school council, you are approached by a small group of staff members who would like to have a discussion with you about the school. You feel this is positive and agree to meet with them. At the meeting the group commences to make direct comments about their dissatisfaction with some teacher colleagues and the principal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>