



Many parents extend their involvement from supporting their own child to supporting all children in the school. Through their PACs and DPACs, these parents can create a network of support for all parents and welcome them into the school community.

marble mural by the front door of the school that shows the diversity of the “Chartwell family.”

The next community project included both the social responsibility and literacy goals. Each family worked with their children and provided family stories that represented the virtues of hope and courage. The stories raised awareness among students, staff and parents of the human values shared by the families regardless of race and culture.

“The Get Along Gang”, a group of mothers, met each week to learn about each other’s countries, traditions, foods and roles played by women. They also helped new English Language learners. These parents began to reach out individually to welcome new parents into the school. They introduced them to the academic and behavioural norms of the school and their new community. Loneliness was broken down, and the community shared a deeper understanding of Canadian educational philosophy. A sense of personal identity was restored to families separated from homeland and culture.

Whitley said the Chartwell PAC, SPC and staff gave students a sound foundation for success. They created a place where parents could meet and participate in community, where they could reach out confidently for help and assistance, where they were able to build on their skills to meet the needs of their family and where they could be learners and accepted for their contributions.

The Parent Advisory Council (PAC)

Parents contribute to the life and energy in schools in many ways including their involvement in the Parent Advisory Council (PAC). Every parent can belong to and participate in the PAC. Every parent has a vote and a voice in the PAC.

The PAC’s constitution outlines its mandate to represent parents and focus on the best interests of all students in the school. PACs must make bylaws, in consultation with the principal, to govern their meetings and the business and conduct of their affairs. One of the bylaws includes how parents in the school elect a PAC executive to represent them. Parents have the right, through the PAC executive, to give advice to the staff, school and school board about any matter relating to the school that is not the responsibility of the School Planning Council (SPC). The PAC gives input to the SPC through the parents it elects to the SPC.

The PAC executive organizes ways for parents to meet to discuss school issues of interest and concern to parents and give input to the SPC. The principal may attend the meetings and offer information that helps parents

in their discussions. The executive works closely with the principal. They develop a respectful working relationship that enables the PAC to support the school in a positive way and address parent concerns when they arise.

The PAC executive relies on the help of many parents to plan and run different activities in the school to support students, parents and staff.

The PAC members may elect a parent by secret ballot to represent the PAC at the District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC). The DPAC representative takes the PAC's issues and ideas to the DPAC meeting for discussion and action where necessary.

The PAC also elects three parents by secret ballot to represent parents on the SPC. One of the parents elected must be a member of the PAC executive. These parents provide the parents' views to the SPC, so PACs set time on their agenda for those discussions. The SPC representatives also keep the PAC informed about what is happening at the SPC and how the SPC considered parent views in the development and review of the school plan.

The PAC may choose to join the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC). (See page 17).

Connecting Elementary and Secondary School Parents

When families left Tumbler Ridge (SD 59 Peace River South) to find work elsewhere, it meant the closure of one elementary school and small enrollments in the single elementary and secondary schools in town.

There was no PAC at the secondary school, and parents of children in the elementary (K-6) and secondary schools (7-12) saw benefits in combining the parent communities. Coming together has helped the elementary parents understand more about the high school and encouraged them to stay involved in some way at the secondary level, PAC chair Linda Helm said. With school enrollments of about 190 and 180 students, there is also a larger pool of parents to draw on to support the schools. The PAC now is focusing on overcoming the childcare challenges that prevent elementary parents from being involved by providing care in the high school gym. This is also giving high school students opportunities to volunteer and connect with young children in their community.

The District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC)

The *School Act* says PACs can form a District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) to represent them to the school board. The DPAC is the collective voice of parents, through member PACs, in the school district.

The DPAC also develops a constitution and bylaws to guide their activities. A DPAC executive, elected from the PAC representatives, represents the views of the PACs and provides advice to the board about any matter relating to education in the school district. This includes advice on the school board's accountability contract with the Ministry of Education.

The superintendent or someone chosen by the superintendent and school board trustees may attend DPAC meetings. Often, they provide current information about the school district, answer questions and hear parent views.

The DPAC supports the role of the PACs by providing information and education and actively seeks PAC input before providing advice to the school board. Being part of a DPAC gives PACs the chance to talk about what is happening throughout the district. When an issue affects many students in the district, the DPAC raises the issue with the school board and district staff and they work together to find a solution. This requires the DPAC to have an understanding of the policies and processes used in the school district.

For example, a PAC or DPAC may hear of parent concerns about the fairness of a school board policy. The DPAC can seek more information about the concern and if necessary, request a review of the policy. DPAC members often sit on school district committees to represent parents' views and concerns.

The DPAC may choose to join BCCPAC. Some DPACs also choose to participate in the BCCPAC Advocacy Project (See page 24).

Using Technology to Overcome Meeting Challenges

Unsafe winter driving conditions as well as a three-hour drive from one end of the district to the other created a serious challenge to meeting as a DPAC in Southeast Kootenay School District (SD 5). About six years ago, the DPAC decided to meet the challenge by using video-conferencing for meetings. In the beginning, the equipment didn't always work and people found it hard to get used to talking to a big screen, said Cheryl McCann, DPAC President. Attendance increased, though, and the school district now supports the DPAC by providing the equipment and a technician free of charge.

To make video-conferencing work for them, the DPAC finds it has to be more organized—no chance to hand out last minute papers when everyone is in a different location! Four locations (Cranbrook, Fernie, Sparwood and Elkford) can be video-conferenced, and the DPAC hopes to include Jaffray this year so all parents have the opportunity to attend the meeting in their own community. Each of the communities represented by the DPAC face different challenges and while video-conferencing may be less personable than the traditional face-to-face meetings, the reps are experiencing the benefits of sharing information and understanding the district as a whole—with less time on the road.

What Works for PACs and DPACs

Focusing on the best interests of all students, supporting all parents to be involved and informed, helping parents to advocate for their children, advising the staff, school and district—these are critical and important roles for PACs and DPACs.

Every PAC and DPAC in the province is unique, reflecting the needs and diversity of the students and parents in their schools and district. PACs and DPACs find that they can be more successful when they:

- develop and work within constitutions and bylaws that clearly state their mandate
- understand and respect the roles and responsibilities of the partner groups
- develop and maintain respectful relationships with students, parents, PACs, school and district staff and the community
- encourage activities that support all levels of parent involvement
- identify the challenges to parent involvement and work with staff to overcome them
- help parents to understand the policies and procedures in their schools and district and work with partner groups to make the information readily available
- deal fairly and non-judgementally with parent concerns
- develop communication and conflict resolution skills within the PAC/DPAC, including a code of ethics and a fair way to deal with breaches of the code
- respect the privacy rights of students, parents and staff



Some of the ways PACs and DPACs are communicating with parents:

- Personal contact
- Print and electronic newsletters
- Meeting in different communities within the school district
- Conference calls, on-line audio and video conferencing, email
- Websites
- Translating their materials into different languages: Vancouver DPAC has published PAC 101, A Simple Look at the Parent Advisory Council in English, Chinese, Punjabi and Vietnamese.
www.vsb.bc.ca/parents/families/DPAC/Goldmine+PAC+handbook.htm



PAC and DPAC meetings are not the place to discuss the personal problems parents have with their children or with specific staff or schools. However, if many parents and students in the school or district share a problem that does not involve individual school staff, PACs and DPACs can work with staff to solve the problem in the best interests of all the students. Both PACs and DPACs can offer information to parents to help them advocate for their children, and they may have parents who are available to provide personal support and information.

- communicate with parents in a variety of ways, including in language(s) and terms that can be understood by all parents
- understand and respect the diversity of parents in schools and districts
- encourage other parents to take on leadership roles and seek parents who reflect the diversity in schools and districts
- network provincially with other PACs/DPACs through BCCPAC
- acknowledge and celebrate what is working well.

Working Together – Parents and School

