

# 3 coming together

*“Public schools are the ideal place for our children to learn about democracy. We adults have the opportunity to demonstrate to children by example that dignity and respect are the cornerstone of any fair and equitable system.”*

Dulcie McCallum, Open Letter from the Ombudsman. Fair Schools. Public Report No. 35 May 1995

Ask people who work or volunteer in schools why they are involved, and each person will have a different way of saying “to help students succeed.”

They will also have a different way of describing what they think success for students looks like.

Public schools are places where people with different backgrounds, views and experiences come together. It is not surprising that there is a wide range of opinion about what student success looks like and how parents, educators and the community might work together to support it.

This shared vision—student success—is the foundation of the school as a learning community. Parents, at all levels of involvement, are part of the collaborative effort within the learning community to improve success for all students.

Schools and districts spend time nurturing the relationships and developing the processes necessary to help them achieve their vision. They consider how shared values lead to positive relationships, how leadership and collaboration contributes to students’ learning and how schools will know that what they are doing is working. Parents, and wherever possible, students, are included in these conversations.

## Values

Values are the moral and ethical priorities that guide people’s actions. Research shows that peoples and cultures around the world share the following values:<sup>9</sup>

- compassion
- fairness
- honesty
- responsibility
- respect.



**In BC, the professional organizations of educators have codes of ethics that guide their members. Many PACs and DPACs have also developed codes of ethics. In developing these codes, all of these organizations used shared values to bring their members together.**

Values shape the behaviour that people expect of themselves and of others. Learning communities talk about the values they believe contribute to a culture of trust and mutual support. In times of challenge or conflict, this commitment to their core values helps people maintain their relationships with each other.

Developing and maintaining a school culture of trust and mutual support involves:

- leadership and commitment from all groups in the school and district
- respect for each other
- open communication
- information-sharing
- respect for confidentiality
- civility
- integrity
- competence.

## Leadership

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In learning communities, schools and districts value “shared” or “distributed” leadership. Many more people are involved in the leadership activity and they bring different information, experience and skills to the table. Those in formal roles of leadership, i.e. superintendent, principal, vice-principal, help others develop and demonstrate their capacity as leaders. They support a collaborative environment where others can be creative in developing plans that serve the needs of students.

Many districts focus on strengthening leadership capacity within the schools and district. They often include parents when they offer leadership development opportunities. PACs, DPACs and BCCPAC also give parents information and support to help them develop their leadership skills so they can play an active role in their learning communities.



The BCSSA believes it is important to have “ethically fit” leaders in public education who can help school boards, principals and teachers in ethical decision-making. They believe that everything they do in this regard will ultimately affect the development, achievement and lives of students. BCSSA is supporting school districts to build capacity for ethical leadership within their organizations and communities.

For information about the Ethics in Education Initiative (EEI), visit [www.bcssa.org](http://www.bcssa.org)

*“Recent research on district leadership makes one point amply clear. Top-down bureaucratic management is being replaced by bottom-up executive leadership that encourages shared decision-making among school staff, community, business, and other stakeholders.”*

Dimensions of Practice for Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, and Directors of Instruction or Equivalent. BCSSA



■ For more about teamwork, team roles and expectations, visit the Ministry of Education website: [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/notesteamwork.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/notesteamwork.pdf).

For other information on teamwork, visit Working on Teams at: <http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/learn/teams/>

*“Any attempt to form genuine collaborations among school staff, parents, and community members must start with building relationships of respect. The building of relationships must be intentional and consistent.”*

Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp. 2002

## Teamwork

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A team is a group of people who have a clear purpose for coming together. Members understand and believe that thinking, planning, decisions and actions are better when they work together. The team is most effective when the members have a sense of accountability to each other and the team as a whole, share a commitment to what the team wants to achieve and how it will work together.

Three areas of attention<sup>10</sup> are important to attend to in group development and teamwork:

**Attention to Task:** The team is time and energy efficient. It decides how to operate, sets and maintains clear goals and criteria for success and keeps on task. It uses the right information to make decisions.

**Attention to Process:** Members pay attention to how the team is functioning. They develop an agenda for each meeting and follow agreed upon protocols and ground rules. Members take on different roles to help focus their efforts.

**Attention to Relationships:** Members feel safe and their participation and contribution is balanced. They recognize and honour the need for diversity and anticipate that productive disagreement is part of reaching for excellence.

## Collaboration

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Collaboration is an on-going process in which people work together toward a common goal, to solve a common problem or address a common concern. Coming together does not naturally lead to collaboration. To collaborate, individuals pay as much attention to developing a relationship with each other as they do to the work itself. Collaboration takes time and involves a new way of thinking and working with others.

When people agree to collaborate, they commit to:

- mutual trust and respect
- mutual goals
- sharing resources
- spending the time
- equally valuing each person's contribution
- sharing responsibility for participation and decision-making
- sharing accountability for outcomes.

Some of the benefits of collaboration include:

- building relationships
- opportunities for all to be heard
- more diversity in opinion
- better understanding of perspectives
- better decisions that are more likely to last
- more acceptance of the outcomes.

## Communication

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Communication skills help in building and maintaining relationships. They can help reduce the chances for conflict to take hold. Part of respecting others is about listening to understand their perspectives and needs. Everyone involved in the public education system has a responsibility to communicate well and help others communicate effectively.

*“Seek first to understand,  
then to be understood.”*

Stephen Covey

### Effective communicators:<sup>11</sup>

1. strive to put people at ease; they
  - keep their focus positive
  - promote trust and respect
  - work to improve relationships.
2. work to understand the other person’s views; they
  - put themselves in the other person’s shoes - what are their needs, interests, motivations?
  - ask open-ended questions
  - keep an open mind—avoid making judgments
  - encourage the speaker.
3. practice good listening skills; they
  - gain co-operation
  - show interest
  - listen for the main ideas
  - resist distractions
  - summarize.
4. think about what they want to say and how they want to say it; they
  - use understandable language, avoid acronyms
  - always treat the other person with respect.



**The Royal Commission's  
Report on Parents in  
Education states:**

**“Mechanisms for the  
resolution of conflict should  
be established and clearly  
delineated at the provincial,  
district and school levels.”**

Parents in Education, Report of the  
Working Group on Parent's Role:  
Rights and Responsibilities,  
Report 2 April 1988

*“Students, parents, teachers,  
teacher aides and all others  
whose work impacts students  
must have the opportunity to  
be heard in decisions that  
affect them.”*

Fair Schools. Public Report No. 35.  
May 1995

## Conflict

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At some time, in any relationship, conflict can occur. Conflict is not always negative, although it often makes people feel uncomfortable or react defensively. When people are able to discuss why they see things differently, they often learn important information that helps them make better decisions.

The chances of resolving conflict improve when:

- all persons feel respected and heard
- the issue is taken seriously
- the process to hear the issue is considered fair and unbiased
- the person(s) ultimately responsible for resolving the conflict are respectful, consistent and genuinely sincere in their responses.

One of the ways to reduce the potential for conflict includes modelling the principles of fairness and natural justice (see page 36) and ensuring those principles and processes are readily available. When people feel heard, they are more willing to consider new ways of resolving the conflict.

When conflict between people or groups becomes common, it is important to consider whether it is a sign of a larger problem.

- Is the leadership addressing the conflict or using effective conflict resolution skills?
- Is there a supportive environment for conflict resolution?
- Is there accountability for communication and conflict resolution skills?
- Are skills training and resources available to build and maintain effective relationships?

When education partners value relationships of mutual trust and support, they can maintain their relationship and continue to work with each other even in those times when conflict cannot be resolved.

## Decision-making

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Every day, people in the public school system make decisions. The way decisions are made depends on the issue, whom it affects and who has the responsibility and authority to make it. When the decision affects an individual or a group, school districts have processes in place to give those people affected by the decision the chance to influence the outcome of the decision. Those processes are found in school board policies.

Schools and districts use a variety of ways to involve parents and others in decision-making.

### Principles of Natural Justice

1. The right to be heard and present evidence. A person should not be adversely affected by a decision-maker without being able to put forward a case that is relevant to his or her own concerns.
2. The right to know the facts upon which the decision-maker based the decision.
3. A decision-maker should not be biased. A person should therefore have a right to have a matter determined by an unbiased adjudicator.

Guidelines for Investigators of Pacific Ombudsman, September 1993

*“School board decisions take the form of plans, policies and budgets—all of which need to be aligned in order to achieve the vision for public education held by the community and defined by the school board.”*

Key Work Resources. British Columbia School Trustees Association. November, 2005

### Consensus

Consensus decisions<sup>12</sup> are useful because all members of the team agree to support the group’s decision, even when the decision is not their first preference.

Making decisions by consensus:

- involves everyone and incorporates all ideas
- generates commitment to action and to each other
- helps teams work together in a positive way to develop mutual trust and understanding
- helps identify areas of agreement
- facilitates discussion
- provides an opportunity to explore how each person feels about an issue – Information that is important when designing an eventual action plan.

Coming to consensus usually depends on everyone in the group being satisfied that their concerns have been expressed and considered. Everyone has had “their say.” More time may be required for discussion, exploring ideas and considering all the options; however, members will support the decisions made. Moving ahead with the decision or change will be much smoother than if members of the group oppose the solution/decision.



#### Finding more information

The internet is a source for information about decision-making, conflict resolution and management and working with teams.

Some examples are:

- Basics of Consensus at [www.ic.org/nica/Process/Consensusbasics.htm](http://www.ic.org/nica/Process/Consensusbasics.htm)
- Interpersonal Relationships and Conflict Resolution at <http://www.ic.org/nica/Process/Relation.html>
- On Conflict and Consensus, a handbook on formal consensus decision-making at [www.anarres.org.au/essays/ocac.htm](http://www.anarres.org.au/essays/ocac.htm)
- Working on Teams at <http://web.mit.edu/hr/oed/learn/teams/>

## Advising

Parents may advise the school or district through their PAC or DPAC. To advise means “to give an opinion or counsel, or recommend a plan or course of action...it is different in meaning from “instruct” or “persuade.”<sup>13</sup> BCCPAC suggests that the school or district work with education partners to set up a process for providing advice that reflects the following elements:<sup>14</sup>

- mutual understanding and respect of each partner’s roles and responsibilities
- effective communication
- clear, easily understood language and processes that everyone can use
- equal opportunity to speak and be heard
- equal access to relevant information, resources and expertise
- joint planning, goal-setting and evaluation
- a shared desire to work in the interests of students and public education.
- training, resources and mentorship for parent leaders
- information from the school and district staff on how parental advice and resources are used.

## Consultation

Consultation is an exchange of ideas and opinions among the partners, usually on an equal basis. Where ideas or opinions of the partners are not included, the decision-maker explains the reasons.

For example, parents can consult with a teacher or principal on their child’s educational program. Educators use their professional judgement and consider the information parents provide to help develop the program in the best interest of the child. Parents feel consulted when their information and ideas are included in their child’s program, and they continue to be involved as the program changes to respond to the needs of the child.

In a consultation at the district level, partners may take an active role in shaping policy. At the end of the consultation, the school board is responsible for making the final decision and for carrying out the policy.

Because they represent all the people who live in the district, school boards also consult with the whole community. One of the ways they consult is through community forums. A community forum engages parents, community members, agencies and others for a specific purpose. It reaches out to plan with families and the community. A forum is useful when consulting in the development of programs and partnerships for children that are meaningful to families and community. School boards also hold

forums to address issues of common concern to the school, district and community. Forums offer the chance for school boards to hear and consider the community's collective wisdom in its decision-making.

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### Consulting on the Local School Calendar

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Peace River North School District (SD 60) is located on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains on the northern tip of the Canadian Prairies. The main centre, Fort St. John has six elementary schools, two junior secondary schools and one large senior secondary school. There are also three elementary schools in the surrounding communities of Taylor, Charlie Lake and Baldonnel.

To deal with budget challenges, Peace River North School Board has altered the standard school calendar a number of times. One year, the board proposed a school calendar that would reduce the number of days schools were in session and extend the school day. The board proposed extending spring break by a week and distributing the remaining days throughout the rest of the year, said board chair Gary Gamble.

When a school board considers a change to the standard school calendar, it must consult with parents affected by the change.

During the board's consultation meetings with the parents in the schools, trustees learned that the parents in the surrounding communities wanted a different school calendar than the one the board proposed. They wanted to observe different holidays, Gamble said. The board knew that when the district followed the standard calendar, children in those schools were absent on those particular days. As a result, the board adopted two different school calendars: one for schools in those communities and the original proposal for the schools in Fort St. John.

When the board consults with parents, "we listen," he said. Parents can provide more information that helps the board make decisions that support children and families.

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■ **CommunityLINK** (Learning Includes Nutrition and Knowledge) provides funding to all 60 school boards to support vulnerable students in academic achievement and social functioning. The funding helps districts provide services such as breakfast and lunch programs, inner city school programs, after-school care, school-based support workers, community school programs and counselling for at-risk children and youth.

For more information, visit [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/communitylink](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/communitylink)

*“Positive impact through engagement stems from partnerships between schools, parents and communities that are based on mutual benefit, respect and accountability.”*

Improving Educational Impact Through Community and Family Engagement  
Intercultural Development Research Association Newsletter.  
November-December 2002

## Community Involvement

More and more, schools are serving students’ social as well as their educational needs. Community members and agencies offer valuable skills and information that support schools in these efforts. Schools recognize that to help students succeed in learning and life, schools and the communities they serve need to be strongly connected.

### Working Together to Support Early Literacy

Qualicum School District (SD69) is supporting children’s readiness to learn when they start kindergarten by reaching out to families with pre-school children. It all began in 1999 when the district determined that to get all students in Grade 3 reading at grade level, the students were going to need help with literacy in their preschool years.

The school board committed to putting the time and money in to make it work, said school board chair Rhonda Roy. The board funded a Community Literacy Liaison position to coordinate preschool literacy initiatives. The liaison pulled together key people in the Oceanside community to talk about a vision for pre-school literacy. Knowing that literacy initiatives are less likely to succeed when families are in need, the group became the Building Learning Together Steering Committee, a working partnership of community agencies, non-profit groups, parents, First Nations and government representatives that share resources, ideas and expertise.

Today more than 18 early literacy projects are under way in the community. The district coordinates the projects, although it does not offer all of them. The Words on Wheels (WOW) bus is just one example of the community partnership at work. The school district donated a school bus that was renovated with the help of the Qualicum Beach Rotary Club, the Newcomers Clubs, Woodworkers Guild, community volunteers, students from Ballenas Secondary and many community businesses and agencies. The bus is a travelling resource centre, visiting neighbourhoods throughout the district. It provides a welcoming place for children and families to explore the wonders of literacy through books, activities and story-time. “Community visitors” hop aboard to help connect families with other resources in the community, from health to childcare to adult literacy programs.

These outreach efforts are paying off for families, Roy said. Schools are seen as more welcoming to families when preschoolers are enjoying songs, stories and rhymes with Mother Goose in the local elementary school libraries. Many of the personal barriers families face in learning about and accessing much-needed services are being addressed.

The success of this program can be attributed to the commitment of

the steering committee and the agencies involved, as well as the tremendous support from the community itself. Individual businesses donate time, money and goods, crafts and trades people donate their skills, and seniors and others bake goods and volunteer to be Grandbuddies. This level of commitment by the community shows their belief in supporting families in their community, Roy said.

Partners work in a respectful relationship that focuses on working together to meet the needs of children and families. Information is gathered and shared to help evaluate their progress toward delivering a comprehensive system of supports and services for young children and their families.

For more information about Building Learning Together, visit the district website [www.sd69.bc.ca](http://www.sd69.bc.ca)



### Early Learning and Literacy

In BC, the Ministry of Education has also recognized the importance of children's early development and family involvement to children's success at school. It has published *Ready, Set, Learn*, a booklet with tips to help parent support pre-schoolers. The booklet, published in 13 languages is available in districts or on the ministry website [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/rs1](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/rs1)

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9 Institute for Global Ethics. [www.globalethics.org/about/history.htm](http://www.globalethics.org/about/history.htm)

10 Adapted from *Notes about Teamwork*\* adapted from Bruce Wellman and Laura Lipton. [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/notesteamwork.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/notesteamwork.pdf)

11 Adapted from *PAC/DPAC Relations: Turning Conflict into Collaboration*, BCCPAC Advocacy Project. BCCPAC Leadership Conference, Fall 2005.

12 Adapted from *Notes About Building Consensus* designed for School Planning Councils. [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/spctrainres.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/spctrainres.htm)

13 Black, Henry Campbell, *Black's Law Dictionary*, Sixth Edition West Publishing Company p.54

14 Adapted from *Effective Consultation Leads to Better Partnerships*. ImPACT. Quarterly newsletter published by BCCPAC