



14

The Parents' Committee Focal Point of Parental Participation

Fédération des comités de parents



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Resources

For answers to your questions, to learn more about a subject or to find the right tools or resources... contact the FCPPO.

We offer:

- Advice;
- Information brochures;
- References;
- Training workshops.

Visit our web site www.fcppo.qc.ca or contact your regional association through the Parents' Committee at your School Board.

Acknowledgement

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A Short History of the Parents' Committee

Parents' Committees first came on the scene in school boards across the province on July 1, 1972, the date when parents' participation was officially recognized in the education milieu. For the first time, parents became partners in the education system. A few years later, in 1975, the Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec was established, bringing information and support to parents.

In 1979, representatives of the Parents' Committee began to sit on the Council of Commissioners and the Executive Committee of the school board. During this period, the legislature introduced mandatory subjects for consultation to be submitted to the Parents' Committee by the school board.

In 1998, a direct link was created between the Parents' Committee and the Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC), with one parent member from the latter sitting on the Parents' Committee from that time on.

First, Let's Count on Ourselves!

The only standing body made up exclusively of parents in the Quebec school network, the Parents' Committee must wholeheartedly take on the responsibility of promoting the parents' place in education. It must ensure that parents are present at all levels of the education milieu and that together they receive the education they want for their children.

Made up of parents, for parents and by parents, the Parents' Committee is faced with the challenge of becoming, through its dynamism, commitment of its members and its initiatives to provide support and leadership, **the focal point of parental participation** in each community.

A great many people who work in the school network, and who, in many instances, have children of their own, believe that parent participation is necessary to ensure the success of all young people. They are often the first to encourage parents to become more directly involved in the education of their children. However, it is an illusion to think that parents will fully occupy their rightful place, which is essential to the education of young people, if they do not assume responsibility for developing and maximizing the potential of their role in education. This is where the mission of the Parents' Committee lies.

The **Fédération des comités de parents** exists precisely to support each committee in this responsibility.



The Parents' Committee at the Heart of a Changing Network

In this vast undertaking to transform the system, parents have not been forgotten. On the contrary, today they have more rights and responsibilities than ever before.

The Quebec school network has experienced significant changes since 1997, when Bill 180 on the sharing of powers and responsibilities led to the modification of the Education Act. A spirit of renewal emerged in the education system at that time. Structures were reorganized and powers were transferred to the schools, putting schools at the forefront of the education system and redefining the role of each of the actors.

With the creation of **Governing Boards**, parents began taking part in the decision-making process. The aim of the **Parent Participation Organization (PPO)**, which may be set up in each school, is in fact to ensure the development of this participation.

At the school board level, the mission of **the Parents' Committee** changes: This committee becomes the only forum that is both reserved for parents and is mandatory, as opposed to the PPO which is optional. Its members, continually in contact with the other partners when they are on the Governing Board, here find themselves working with other parents and sharing their experiences and opinions. Consequently, the Parents' Committee is the only permanent educational structure devoted to defending the interests of parents, expressing their needs and encouraging their participation.



The First Challenge of the Parents' Committee: To Promote the Participation of Parents

The Parents' Committee is carrying out its role to the fullest when it is involved in various training and information activities for parents.

Important responsibilities have been assigned to the Parents' Committee by the legislature. As well as being an advisory body that must be consulted by the school board, the Parents' Committee is responsible for developing and promoting parent participation. To this end, its actions are carried out on three different levels.

Promote the Participation of All People in Education

As we stated earlier, because of its strategic position, the Parents' Committee is the focal point of parental participation in the school network. It is the vehicle for transmitting information on the role of parents¹. Therefore it must be on the lookout for new developments and pass this information on to the community.

Promote Awareness Among Parents About the Activities of the School Board

The Education Act (s. 192) entrusts the Parents' Committee with the responsibility of promoting parents' participation in the activities of the school board. Oftentimes, the administrative affairs of the school board seem far removed from parents' concerns, yet they have a significant impact on the lives of the students.

For example, if the school board undertakes a consultation in anticipation of making some change, the committee must ensure that parents will have the opportunity to be heard and it must actively seek their participation. The same holds true for a campaign to promote a school or a vocational training program, for an activity to reward students, or an information program on curriculum reform: The Parents' Committee ensures that information is transmitted and sees to it that concrete actions are taken to raise awareness among parents in all schools.

Appoint Parents to Participate on the Various Committees Set Up by the School Board

The Education Act stipulates that in addition to the Parents' Committee, the school board must establish the Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC) and the Advisory Committee on Student Transportation. The Parents' Committee appoints the parents who will serve on these committees that include representatives from several groups.

As part of a participatory management approach, school boards regularly form special permanent or temporary committees to study various questions and to submit recommendations. Parents can play an important role in the orientations chosen on these committees. The Parents' Committee must therefore ensure parents' participation in these special committees. It is their responsibility to appoint the parents who will become members of these bodies and to support them in their work.



¹ See Leaflet 3 of the Training Program: "Getting the Facts about Parent Participation in the School", FCPPQ, 2001

The Second Challenge: To Fully Exercise Its Influential Power



Give the Advice of Parents About School Board Operations

According to the Act, the Parents' Committee has the responsibility to "give advice on any matter conducive to the most efficient operation possible of the school board" (Education Act, s. 192, (2)). This is where it mainly exercises its influential power. The committee may intervene on any issue relating to the school board's responsibility, in areas as varied as:

- Overall administration, for example the decentralization of services to the institutions, the role of head office and of centralized services;
- Management of human resources, including hiring of personnel, working conditions and labour relations;
- Management of immovables, equipment and supplies that directly affects the quality of the educational services provided by the schools;
- Management of financial resources, for example fees to parents, other sources of financing and advertising in the schools;
- Student transportation which has a important impact on school life, placement services and lunch-hour services;
- Daycare services within the schools;
- The educational services that remain centralized at the school board, for example complementary or specialized services for school adjustment, pedagogical support to schools (we can also mention the way the school board meets its principal responsibilities which are to ensure that the services are provided, evaluated, etc.);
- The various policies and other administrative documents that are used as references by management at the school board and that are part of management codes.

Thus, the Parents' Committee can intervene in everything that takes place at the school board. As an advisory body, its influence will, however, be proportional to the quality of the advice it gives. Consequently, it will have to back up its recommendations with strong arguments and ensure that parents' opinions are well presented.

Voice the Needs of Parents

The Parents' Committee acts as a spokesperson for parents at the school board. The Education Act stipulates that its function is "to inform the school board of the needs of parents" (Education Act, s. 192, (3)), as identified by its members.

Thus, the committee can become an agent of change in its milieu. Already, a great many services, now offered in schools, were developed thanks to the interventions of Parents' Committees who exercised this function. As an example, think of the creation of the first daycare services.

To fulfil its mandate, the Parents' Committee needs its members to consult their communities, using a variety of means, so they can voice a well-founded need that forces the school board to act.

Act as an Advisor to the School Board



Each year, at the beginning of its mandate, the Parents' Committee would be advised to look at this list of mandatory matters for consultation and come to an agreement with the school board about the items that will be dealt with during the year. Although consultation on these matters is obligatory, it is not automatically yearly. When no change is foreseen and the context remains the same, it is often futile to reopen the issue. Nevertheless, if the Parents' Committee so wishes, it can give advice on one of these matters whenever it feels it is appropriate.

Many people may feel this duty, imposed by the Act, is an onerous one. It requires members of the committee to have a good understanding of numerous issues since, according to the Act, the Parents' Committee must "give its opinion to the school board on any matter the latter is required to submit to it" (Education Act, s. 192 (4)).

The Parents' Committee must by obligation be consulted on ten points (Education Act, s. 193). In other words, the school board cannot take action in the following areas without first having been advised by the Parents' Committee:

The division, annexation or amalgamation of school board territory

School board territories have undergone significant restructuring over the last decade: they are not immutable! Inevitably, a change in these structures has an impact on the services provided.

The three-year plan of allocation and destination of school board immovables, the list of schools and the deeds of establishment

This is a major issue and comes up every year. With the current scarcity of resources, parents must be attentive to cost-cutting measures that can have positive or negative effect on the quality of services.

The policy in respect of the continued operation or closing of schools

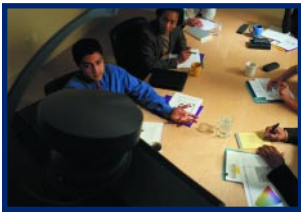
The school board is required to adopt such a policy (Education Act, s. 212). With the current reduction in the number of students, the Parents' Committee must first ensure that the school board has such a policy and must closely monitor its application. We know what repercussions closing a school can have on student success, on family, and community life.

The distribution of educational services among the schools

What services are there in each school? In what proportion are they offered? These are important questions concerning access to different services: teaching services related to the study programs, special needs services, complementary services provided for in the Basic School Regulation such as psychology, speech therapy, etc.

The criteria for the enrolment of students in schools

Parents, who are familiar with how a school board operates, know to what extent this element also has major repercussions on the school and the family. You can refer to sections 239 and 240 of the Education Act to get a general idea of the scope of this item.



In practice, many school boards have exceeded this limited list of subjects and freely consult the Parents' Committee before intervening in matters that may concern parents. At times, this task even constitutes a large part of its work.

The dedication of a school to a special project and the criteria for the enrolment of students in that school

It has become common practice to establish schools with special projects such as music, art, sports or the international program. While some parents often ask for them, these projects influence other services and it is up to the Parents' Committee to give advice that takes into account the common good of all parents.

The school calendar

The Parents' Committee can ensure that the impact of the school calendar on students and families is taken into account, even though this calendar is often determined by the working conditions set out in collective agreements.

The rules governing promotion from elementary school to secondary school or from the first cycle to the second cycle of the secondary level

These two stages are important periods in a student's life. The legislature deems it best to leave this power to the school boards. It is therefore the responsibility of the Parents' Committee to deal with it.

The objectives and principles governing the allocation of subsidies, school tax proceeds and other revenues among educational institutions as well as the criteria pertaining thereto, and the objectives, principles and criteria used to determine the amount to be withheld by the school board for its needs and those of its committees

This provision seems complex, but the financing of schools depends on it. Amendments to the Education Act have radically changed this financing since the school board must now distribute all its revenues to the schools, except for what is needed to fulfil its own mission. How will it distribute its resources? This question warrants parents' attention. The school board's obligation in this matter is clearly set out in section 275 of the Education Act.

The learning activities established by the school board and intended for parents

This last item shows that the legislature is concerned with training for parents and with parent participation in the school. It is entirely appropriate that the Parents' Committee be involved in these activities.

Positions for Active People



The Parents' Committee is mainly made up of one representative from each of the schools in the school board and one representative of the Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC) (Education Act, s. 189).

Electing representatives

One representative from each school is elected by the General Assembly, which is convened each year in September (Education Act, s. 47). The representative must be chosen from among the parent members of the Governing Board. The SNAC representative is chosen from among the parent members of this particular committee, and by them only. (Education Act, s. 189)

To be a member of the Parents' Committee requires a high dose of energy. It is a task that, of course, demands time and availability. It requires people who are ready to invest their energy and who are convinced that their actions could make a difference for the well-being and success of the students.

Various roles are assigned to members based on the function they hold. Each member has clearly defined responsibilities. Here is a brief outline.

A Common Role: Representative

Members are called "representatives", which clearly defines their role: they represent the parents of a community or the parents of a child with special needs.

Their work is done in three stages. They must be well prepared and familiar with the issues **before each meeting**. Their mandate is to listen, to ask the opinions of parents they represent by using the means they consider appropriate to sound out their community. Whenever necessary, they consult parents of the Governing Board or the Parent Participation Organization, if one exists.

During meetings, they must intervene in the interest of the children in their community. Their involvement will facilitate the formulation of advice that will be given to the school board. This advice will influence the quality of the services offered in the schools.

After each meeting, representatives must inform their community of the work done by the Parents' Committee. They are an important source of information for their schools. Representatives must also offer support to their substitutes and keep them up to date on developments so the substitutes are well prepared to replace them, if necessary. They must also be available to take on other duties within the Parents' Committee in order for the committee to be effective.



The Chair

The Chair, elected by the members, assumes several responsibilities: It is the Chair who prepares the meetings, leads debates, follows up on decisions and acts as spokesperson for the Parents' Committee, at the appropriate time.

The Chair's role demands leadership since the Chair must be able to mobilize and rally members around a common project. The Chair acts as a leader, conciliator and motivator; he or she must be at ease in public, demonstrate a facility for establishing good relations, and maintain an up-to-date network of contacts. The Chair is also an organized person and a go-getter. As well, this function requires complete command of the subjects under study and a good understanding of the issues and of the positions of the Parents' Committee. The Chair is above all a visionary who knows how to lead representatives toward a collective and shared goal.

The Commissioner Representing the Parents' Committee

The Commissioners Representing the Parents' Committee, better known as Parent Commissioners, play a very complex role. They serve on the Council of Commissioners but are first and foremost parents, receiving their mandates from the Parents' Committee. Parent Commissioners cannot dissociate themselves from the Parents' Committee without calling into question the legitimacy of their role.

They participate on the Council of Commissioners in the same capacity as the other members, but are not entitled to vote and cannot be appointed Chair or Vice-Chair of the school board. Nevertheless, they play an essential role: They ensure that the parents' point of view is taken into consideration when decisions are being made and do so even if they do not have an explicit mandate concerning the issue in question. They have the right to express their expectations, concerns, aspirations and ideas and to offer solutions. Sometimes they succeed in orienting the positions of the school board or find support for one of their proposals. Inevitably, they are party to these decisions.

Electing two representatives to the school board

Before the third Sunday in November, the Parents' Committee must elect a commissioner for each school level. The commissioner representing the elementary level is chosen from among the elementary school representatives and the commissioner representing the secondary level is chosen from among the secondary school representatives. Therefore, this person cannot be the SNAC representative. As well, an employee of the school board who can be a member of the Parents' Committee cannot be a candidate for the position of commissioner representing the Parents' Committee.



Before taking the leap, you should know that...

A Parent Commissioner has a demanding job. At the very least, this person serves on the Governing Board, the Parents' Committee, the Council of Commissioners and the Executive Committee of the school board. Moreover, because of his or her expertise, this person is quickly solicited to take part in other activities.

Occupying the position of commissioner is an eminently political task. The school board is a public body, governed by democratically elected people who must answer to those who elected them. It is a political body in the sense that it acts as a form of local government. Politics is also the "art of the possible" and the Parent Commissioner must quickly confront and deal with this reality in order to influence decisions.

The Substitute for the Representative

Over the years, Parents' Committees have been given the right to appoint substitutes to replace members when necessary. This request is not uncommon. On the contrary, having substitutes strengthens the operations of the Parents' Committee, fosters more constant ties between parents of the school and the committee and also prepares successors to take over.

Substitutes obviously must possess all the elements necessary to do the work, because they can be called on to replace representatives at a moment's notice. For that reason, substitutes must know how the Parents' Committee operates, know about the issues under study and be able to prepare quickly for a meeting in which they are asked to participate. Representatives must ensure that all the necessary information is given to the substitutes so the latter can perform their task. From time to time, representatives invite substitutes to attend committee meetings with them.

Appointing substitutes

The Education Act stipulates that a substitute may be appointed for each member of the Parents' Committee. Substitutes are permitted to serve and vote in place of the representative when the latter cannot attend a meeting of the Parents' Committee. The substitute is chosen by election, by the same methods as the representative (Education Act, s. 47 and 189).

To Get a Good Start, You Have to Get Organized!



Here are the principal steps to structure the Parents' Committee and get it off to a good start.

Call a First Meeting

Each year, the members elected by the General Assemblies held in each school and at the SNAC are convened by the outgoing Chair or by the Secretary General of the school board for a first meeting, and this, **before 31 October**. It is during this first meeting that the new Chair is elected.

Provide Yourself With the Means

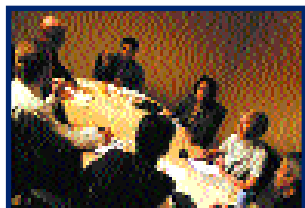
Although this initiative is not set out in the Education Act, many Parents' Committees also set up an Executive Committee. This committee typically takes care of preparing the meetings and helps the Chair see to the follow-up to the assemblies. This committee has no legal power: Its members act in their own names, unless they have received an explicit mandate from the Parents' Committee.

Review How You Do Things

At the start of a new school year, it is important to present the rules of internal procedure to newcomers and to update the rules, if necessary. Typically, what are these rules? They can be about deciding the number of meetings that will be held during the year, the operating methods before, during and after the sessions and about providing details on the roles of the members, the Chair, the Parent Commissioners and the Executive Committee.

The rules of internal procedure ultimately serve to ensure the quality, legality and credibility of the work that will be accomplished by the Committee. However, on their own, good rules are not enough. The advice given by the committee must be based on well-founded arguments, must adequately represent the opinions of parents and must be sufficiently justified so that decision makers cannot reject it out of hand.

How Does it All Work?



The Number of Meetings

The Education Act stipulates that the Parents' Committee must hold at least three meetings per year. However, from experience, we know that this number seldom ensures the full effectiveness of the Committee. Very often, several other meetings are added to the calendar. In some regions, it proves to be difficult to increase the frequency of the meetings. For this reason, or to maximize the participation of members, the Act permits members to participate and vote, using the appropriate means of communication, even when they are not present. Section 195 states that this means must allow all participants to communicate with each other.

Place of Meetings

The Parents' Committee may hold their meetings on the premises of the school board. An agreement must be made with the Director General or with a person designated by the Director General to represent the organization (Education Act, s. 194).

Use of Services

Administrative support services and the facilities of the school board are placed at the disposal of the Parents' Committee free of charge. A prior agreement with the Director General is nevertheless essential to establish the terms and conditions for use. By administrative support, we mean the work typically done by the support staff: clerical, accounting, purchasing, building maintenance, etc. Facilities means the material required to carry out the tasks and conduct meetings (Education Act, s. 194).

Financing

It is the school board that allocates the financial resources necessary for the efficient operation of the Parents' Committee. These resources are entered in the budget and vary from one school board to another. The amount is determined according to various criteria, notably the extent of the administrative support given by the school board. Special factors must also be taken into account: travel costs, childcare costs and anything else that will, in a given community, permit equitable representation of parents.

The Parents' Committee can also have its own revenue. Obviously, the operating budget must balance expenses and revenue. It is the Committee who administers this budget allowance, though the accounting may be entrusted to the school board's administrative services. Here too, a prior agreement with the Director General is essential. Responsible for its finances, the Parents' Committee is of course accountable to the school board for the administration of its budget.

Regional Parents' Committees

In order to respond to particular situations, the legislature has made provisions for a structure of representation on two levels, that is, the Regional Committees under the control of a Central Committee (Education Act, s. 191). This structure applies to school boards that have already divided their territories into administrative regions. It is the school board that, following consultation, determines the allocation of functions and the mode of operation of the Regional and Central Committees.

Duties and Immunity

The Education Act establishes that the members of the Parents' Committee "must act within the scope of the functions and powers conferred on them, and exercise the care, prudence and diligence that a reasonable person would exercise in similar circumstances; they must also act with honesty and loyalty and in the interest of the Parents' Committee and the population it serves" (Education Act, s. 177.1). In return, the Act stipulates, "no committee member may be prosecuted for an act performed in good faith in the discharge of his functions" (Education Act, s. 196). The Act also states that the school board shall assume the defence of any member of the Parents' Committee who is prosecuted for an act done in the discharge of his or her duties.

Maintain the Network of Influence Built on its Credibility



The Parents' Committee is at the centre of a network of influence and must maintain its credibility and its relations with other organizations involved with the school system. It is essential that the Parents' Committee build close and solid ties with its partners. Who are these partners exactly?

Parent Members of the Governing Board and the SNAC

In the current legislation, Governing Boards and the SNAC act directly as advisory bodies to the school boards. Their advice is not filtered through the Parents' Committee since the two groups are composed of members who represent various groups not limited to parents.

At times, the Parents' Committee is consulted on the same subject as these bodies and must adopt a position specific to the parents. Representatives are well placed to consult the parents who sit with them on the Governing Boards or SNAC. It is important to establish a relation of confidence and to work hand in hand with them.

The Parent Participation Organization (PPO)

There is no direct link between the Parents' Committee and the PPOs that are set up in some milieus. However, many advantages result from forming lasting relations with the PPO. The Parents' Committee will find on the PPO parents who are interested in educational issues, which will permit it to enlarge its consultation network and to achieve its mission of promoting parents' participation.

The Parents

The Parents' Committee can make good use of a variety of means to initiate communication with all parents of the school board, for example by using local media, the school board newsletter, the web site, etc. When it is possible, carrying out a broad-based consultation lends weight to the arguments. Real and regular communication therefore increases the influence of the Parents' Committee.

The School Board

Parent commissioners are the favoured link between the Council of Commissioners and the Parents' Committee. Therefore, they are the ones who establish and maintain communication with the school board.

The Chair of the Parents' Committee must maintain close ties with the Director General or with the person designated by the DG to deal with the administrative affairs of the Parents' Committee.

The Regional Section of the FCPPQ

There is a regional section of the FCPPQ in each region in Quebec. This is an important place for parents to exchange ideas, information and resources. Regional sections also need the support and participation of every Parents' Committee in order to be representative of the whole.

The Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec

This provincial organization was set up by the Parents' Committees themselves to help them and to represent them. This is its primary mission. To this end, the Federation offers a wide range of services specially designed for its members, particularly through its training program. It also answers all requests by parents involved or not in the structures of parents' participation.

Finally, the Federation promotes the rights and interests of parents within the population and with the Ministry of Education, the government and various provincial organizations. The Federation is recognized as one of the most important advocates for parents in Quebec.



It's Up to You

- The Parents' Committee represents local interests at the school board. It has enormous influence. It is consulted and listened to.
- To achieve its mission, it must be supported by everyone. The more support it has, the stronger it is.
- In return, it provides support, advice, information and resources to all those who are involved in the schools.
- It intervenes when the school board is preparing to make decisions about aspects that will have an impact on the lives of students and families.
- It works to ensure that the school board offers services that best meets parents' needs and expectations.
- Through its regional section and its Federation, it acts to ensure that parents can express their needs to each of the bodies in the educational network.
- To this end, the Parents' Committee must count on the participation of the people it represents.
- It is counting on you!

