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# **Diocese of Cleveland Guide to School Advisory Councils**

## Catholic Education in the Diocese of Cleveland

Canon 803 of the *Code of Canon Law* states that:

A catholic school is understood to be one which is under the control of the competent ecclesiastical authority...No school, even if it is in fact catholic, may bear the title 'catholic school' except by the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority.

The 'competent authority' in the Diocese of Cleveland is the Bishop of Cleveland who, as chief pastor and teacher is responsible for Catholic schools within his jurisdiction. The Bishop has an obligation to watchover and inspect Catholic schools situated in his territory, even those established or directed by members of religious institutes.

School Advisory Councils are established to support and advise school leadership, including the pastor and the principal. The principal promotes the school's Catholic identity and is the educational leader of the school who has been assigned its operational management and, in collaboration with the parish priest as the governing authority and custodian of mission, is mandated to lead the school in drawing young people and their families into the knowledge and understanding of Jesus and the gospel.

Together the principal as education leader and the parish priest as custodian of mission, through their collaborative work with the School Advisory Council, will ensure that, at the local level, Catholic schools remain actively embedded in the life of the faith communities of the local Church, which in turn is tangibly manifest in the life of each school.



# Creating a School Advisory Council

## Getting Started:

- ❑ Principal discussion with Pastor/President to agree on creation of School Advisory Council
- ❑ Review *DOC, Guide to School Advisory Councils*
- ❑ Determine the Membership criteria outlined in Section III: qualifications, appointment process...
- ❑ Develop the school's own SAC bylaws and forms needed for member participation. Consider "Expectation and Acceptances of Members" on pg. 8 and Sample Standards of Conduct for SAC members on pg. 14.
- ❑ Create a communication plan to inform stakeholders that a School Advisory Council will be formed so potential members can express interest
- ❑ Establish a schedule for meeting dates/times that can be shared with school community and potential members
- ❑ Create a template for meeting agendas and determine how topics will be selected as outlined in Section IV.
- ❑ Follow other steps in the Guide to School Advisory Councils.
- ❑ Consider networking with other schools that have established School Advisory Councils to learn about their processes; lessons learned, successful strategies.



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# *Role & Purpose*

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This policy statement identifies these bodies as school advisory councils rather than as school boards. The term “advisory council” was chosen purposely. The term “school board” has a definite meaning in the public tradition. It is mandated by state statute for school corporations and operates within certain defined legal conditions. Catholic school advisory councils are very different from public school boards in nature and scope.

A Catholic school advisory council is a body whose members are selected and/or elected to participate in the decision-making process in designated areas of responsibility. A parish school is part of the educational mission of the parish for which the pastor is the canonical administrator. He delegates administrative responsibilities to the school principal, who is accountable to him.

The School Advisory Council provides a forum for discussion and discernment, where parent voice and community perspective are available to influence and support the decisions made by the principal and parish priest for the good of school and parish where students’ wellbeing and outcomes are paramount.

In the Diocese of Cleveland, school councils are consultative in nature. The constituting authority, i.e., the pastor of the local school community, establishes those areas wherein the council is to be consulted. Such action is usually made effective by the council’s Constitution. Consultation reasonably implies that the administrator(s) (pastor/principal) shall listen to the advice of the council in certain designated matters prior to final decision-making.

The operating principle is that the administrator(s) will consider seriously and in good faith, the advice which has been given, especially when there is a consensus of the council, unless the administrator(s) has an overriding reason to do so. It is customary, but not obligatory, for the administrator(s) to communicate the reason for not following the advice given in writing to the consultative body, the school advisory council.

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# *Role & Purpose*

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At the heart of our Catholic tradition lies relationship. For parish schools, the relationship between the parish and the school in the provision of Catholic education is crucial to the faith development and learning outcomes of students, the enlivening of parish life and the development of community. It is important that these schools and councils:

- Recognize, develop and maintain fruitful relationships within the parish
- Recognize the role of the school in the overall mission of the parish
- Recognize the contribution of parish to school
- Support the relationship between school and parish
- Play an active role in the life of the parish.

The School Advisory Council plays a role in supporting the parish priest and principal relationship as a means of building the parish and school community. There are clear expectations that monthly, if not on a regular basis, meetings between the parish priest and principal in turn provide a firm foundation for the work of the council. Investment of time and resources in life-giving relationships between the parish priest, principal and families breathes life into the Catholic school community.

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# *School Advisory Councils*

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## ***School Advisory Councils are:***

- a consultative, review and advisory body
  - guided in their actions by the school's mission statement, and an understanding of the history of the parish, founders and school
  - a forum for members to share their wisdom with, and offer support to, the principal and the strategic interests of the school.
  - a sounding board for all stakeholders that provide feedback to the principal and parish priest
  - an important point of liaison with parish pastoral councils
  - avenues for parents to contribute to their children's school and build up one another
  - a form of Church lay ministry
  - a means of engagement with parents and members that enables a fruitful participation in consultation on matters affecting the education of students.
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## ***School Advisory Councils are not:***

- the governing body of a school
  - advisors in personnel matters
  - a forum for parent advocacy, grievance or special interest representation
  - a parents and friends association
  - involved in the day-to-day management of the school
  - a decision-making authority nor do they have a legal identity
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## ***School Advisory Councils support the school and principal by:***

- articulating and enacting the school's mission and vision, and promoting the school's Catholic ethos and culture by promoting faith formation and development
  - encouraging the partnership and participation of the school, parish and wider community in the life of the school and parish
  - providing assistance to the principal on school improvement, school reviews, the annual school budget and other financial matters, capital resource planning and maintenance
  - contributing to the selection process for school principal via membership on the search committee
  - having a process of discernment that provides the foundation for the induction of council members
  - developing processes of consultation and providing a forum for discussion and discernment, where parent voice and perspective are available to inform and support the decisions made by the principal and the parish priest for the good of school and parish where students' wellbeing and outcomes are paramount
  - understanding and acknowledging that any initiative that materially affects the school's land and buildings or other areas of parish property must be approved by the parish priest, who represents their parish as the beneficial owner of the school's land and buildings
  - producing a School Advisory Council Annual Report that acknowledges the activities, achievements and challenges of the council over the past year, and indicates goals and focus for the following year
  - undertaking an annual evaluation to reflect upon its performance and areas for improvement.
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# Membership

## Council Structure

Serving on the School Advisory Council of a Catholic school is a form of Church lay ministry. It is a response to the call to support the local Catholic parish and school communities in a particular way. It is also a means for members of our community to share their skills and talents for the common good. A well-functioning council provides rich sources of wisdom and insight, as well as a means of strengthening community partnerships.

The School Advisory Council should be made up of a minimum of six and a recommended maximum of ten council members who value and share the educational mission and ethos of the Catholic Church comprising of at least:

- a. The principal
- b. The parish priest
- c. Two parents of children attending the school
- d. One parishioner
- e. Another person who in the opinion of the principal has relevant knowledge, skills, expertise or interest and commitment to the mission of the school to serve a particular need on the council.

## Expectations and Acceptances of Members

The School Advisory Council is not a governing body and has no canon/civil law or corporate status. However, council membership must be fit for purpose and composed of people who meet high standards of community, group and individual behaviour, and appreciate, value and share the educational mission and ethos of the Catholic Church.

Each member of the council should receive a letter of appointment that will require them to:

- sign the *Standards of Conduct for School Advisory Members*

## Suggestions for Eligibility Requirements for Advisory Council Membership

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Membership in parish/diocese</li><li>• 18 years of age or older</li><li>• Genuine interest in Catholic education/schools</li><li>• Have a sense of future vision for school</li><li>• Be a credible witness of the Catholic faith to the school and beyond</li><li>• Willingness to maintain high levels of integrity and confidentiality</li><li>• Willingness to support school/diocesan philosophy and mission</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ability to work effectively with others in achieving consensus in decisions for the good of the entire school community</li><li>• Ability and willingness to make necessary and substantial time commitment for thought and study as well as for meetings and related council activities</li><li>• Not a paid employee of any parish/diocesan education program.</li><li>• Not a student at the school</li></ul> |
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# Membership

## Appointment of Council Members

The principal has the power of appointment, reappointment and removal of members of the School Advisory Council, except the parish priest who holds office *ex officio* and cannot be removed by the principal. In appointing council members, the principal will consult with the parish priest following a process of discernment. When appointments are being made, it is important to keep in mind the need for a balance of men and women, cultural diversity and skill sets in forming the council.

Council members are appointed at a set time devised by the council. The principal may, in consultation with the parish priest, at any time make an additional appointment to the council in the event of a vacancy in the minimum prescribed positions or to otherwise fulfil a need on the council; however, any council member so appointed will only hold office until the next set annual appointment round devised by the council following the appointment and, at this time, may apply for membership of the council in the ordinary manner. A preference will be given to new appointees over a repeat nominee to ensure ongoing diversity and renewal.

## Terms and Conditions of Appointment

The period of appointment for council members, with exception of parish priest, the principal and any other *ex-officio* appointment, is generally a term of three years ending on the conclusion of the third year following their appointment. Decisions regarding reappointment for consecutive terms should be addressed in the Bylaws.

The parish priest and the principal hold office on the School Advisory Council *ex officio*, meaning that their term continues for as long as they occupy that office following which they cease to be a member of the council. Their successor in that office then becomes automatically appointed to the council. Any other council members who are appointed on the council *ex officio* due to a specific position in the school (for example, a business manager) will also have a term of office on the council for as long as they occupy that office, following which they cease to be a member. Their successor in that office will be eligible to be appointed to the council, as determined by the principal in consultation with the parish priest.

Potential reasons for a council member's position to become vacant prior to their end of term:

- absenteeism without the consent of the council from three successive meetings of the council, unless the principal determines otherwise
- resignation by notice in writing
- removal from office by the principal
- inability to perform the role due to ill health.
- Any period of office of a council member held during a casual vacancy appointment by the principal (that is, a period of less than one year between annual appointment rounds) is disregarded in counting the maximum permitted tenure of office of a council member of three consecutive terms.

# Membership

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## Expressions of Interest

Generally, expressions of interest to become a council member are made in advance of the set annual appointment round devised by the council. The process of applying for membership of the School Advisory Council is [include how your school processes are publicized to the community, for example, by means of a special letter, newsletter or website]. Anyone interested in becoming a member of the School Advisory Council may seek advice from the principal or parish priest on the process of appointment.

## Screening and Approval

The council's process for screening and approval should include a meeting with the prospective member before his/her name is advanced for nomination. A good idea is to conduct the meeting over lunch or dinner. At this time, the administrator or veteran board member can share some of the success stories of the school and religious education program. The roles and responsibilities of members would also be highlighted at this time.

Prospective council members surface through nominations, self-nominations, invitations or selection. The nominees may be required to complete nomination forms and to submit a letter stating why they wish to serve. From this group, persons could be invited for an interview. The purpose of this interview is to glean information about the nominee's commitment to the program's philosophy and the work of the advisory council. At the same time, the prospective members can decide if they want to serve. The names of the most promising nominees would be placed on a ballot for the advisory council members' vote. Some councils conduct a broader election that goes beyond the existing council to include parents and parishioners.

## Induction

Induction is the formal, structured and supportive method of introducing council members to the School Advisory Council. Each school is responsible for an induction program that is customised to ensure council members understand their role and the role of the council within the context of the school and the wider Church.

Through their reading of the key documents and engagement with the school process, it is expected that each member will understand the purpose of a School Advisory Council and each person's role in pursuing that purpose.

## At-Large Membership

In addition to those members elected, many boards select two or three at-large members who have a special talent or skill needed to further the work of the board.

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# Membership

## Succession Planning

It is the responsibility of each council member to enhance the profile of the council in the parish and school communities, and bring potential council members to the attention of the council executive. The inclusion of non-council members on committees and working parties is a useful tool in succession planning. The council should be conscious of the need to prepare current council members for taking the role of office bearers.

## Conflict of Interest

Each school should be committed to building a School Advisory Council that is free from fraud or corruption, or the perception of fraud or corruption. Conflict of interest arises where a councillor's duty to the school is affected by a personal (actual, potential or perceived) interest. In such cases, the line between personal and professional conduct may become blurred, and interfere with a councillor's capacity to provide advice and fulfil their responsibilities on the council. Conflicts of interest may arise, but do not need to present a problem to any School Advisory Council, school or parish if they are openly and effectively managed.

The Diocesan *Conflict of Interest Policy* for Parish Employees, Contractors and Consultants addresses the requirements for disclosure and management of conflicts of interest, and extends to council members and all members of any committees of the council. It is a requirement of the role that council and committee members abide by and comply with this policy. A copy of this policy is attached with this document.

## Legal Status of Members

School Advisory Council members are volunteers working collaboratively with the principal in the stewardship of the school.

The parish, as a participant in the Diocese of Cleveland master insurance program ("DMIP"), has certain insurance coverage for the activities of volunteers. This insurance coverage is governed by the terms and conditions of the DMIP.

Furthermore, in relation to injury or damage caused by volunteers, volunteers have certain protections under federal and state law. For example, the federal Volunteer Protection Act, 42 U.S.C. § 14503, and R.C. 2305.38 of the Ohio revised code both provide protection for volunteers for actions including actions taken as a board member provided that the statutory conditions for limited liability are satisfied.

*The acceptance of the Acknowledgement Forms, Bylaws, and Advisory Council requirements affirms the educational mission and ethos of the Catholic Church by helping protect children from sexual and physical harm, and making sure that people who work with or care for children undergo a thorough checking process.*

*Like all members of the school community, council members are expected to actively contribute to a school culture by respecting the dignity of its members, affirming the gospel values of love, care for others, compassion and justice.*

# Council Meetings

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## Meeting Structure

Council meetings will be structured to demonstrate that the care, safety and wellbeing of children and young people are a central and fundamental responsibility of our schools.

*Council members will:*

- contribute in such a way that school council advice will be based on all available facts, will normally be reached by consensus and will be free of personal bias
- accept the final position of the council regardless of their personal position on any issue
- invest the necessary time, thought and study into the council's work between and at meetings
- refer day-to-day administrative and operational matters or problems to the principal.

## Prayer in SAC Meetings

Prayer in School Advisory Council meetings should be reflective of our Catholic tradition and allow for reference to the school charism, mission and signs of the times where appropriate.

Sometimes brief prayers will be apt, but at other times the council members may want to spend time on a more extended prayer, particularly if there has been something happening in their school community. Some schools have a school prayer or prayer associated with a founder or patron that should be encouraged for use on occasion. The seasons of the liturgical year – Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter – as well as the gospel reading of the day or the previous Sunday are rich sources of inspiration within our tradition.

## Agendas

Agendas are advance notices of a meeting that set out what business will be considered in the meeting. They need to be circulated at least a week prior to the meeting, with any important proposal having been highlighted and any relevant documentation also having been circulated. A properly structured agenda will assist the School Advisory Council to make the most of its meetings, and enable the members to make informed contributions on the basis of sound advice and constructive debate.

## Minutes

Minutes of School Advisory Council meetings must be consistently formatted with clear item headings, regular spacing and highlighted moments of agreement by consensus.

Well-presented minutes make it easy for users to locate items of interest, and identify the results of deliberations and consensus. Their structure follows the order of the agenda. Minutes should be maintained in an appropriate archive system at the school.

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# Council Meetings

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## Consensus

In the conduct of School Advisory Council meetings, it is important that conversations are encouraged. Good, healthy dialogue where members listen to each other creates positive connections and builds good relationships, enabling the council to explore ideas and proposals. Equally important is that members enter the meeting well-prepared for the discussions that will take place. It is hoped that a well-informed discussion where each person has had a chance to speak, has been listened to intently and feels their ideas have been respected will lead to proposals and ideas being agreed to by consensus. At the heart of an agreement by consensus, although consensus may not be reached in all cases. The freedom to dissent from the majority position should be respected and each member should have an opportunity to make their dissent known in an appropriate way.

## Resources and Templates for Establishing a School Advisory Council

[Conflict of Interest for Parishes](#) (Required for Parish Schools)

[School Advisory Council Confidentiality Agreement](#) (Required)

[Sample - Standards of Conduct for School Advisory Council Members](#) (Required)

[School Advisory Council - Sample Agenda Formats A-C](#)

[School Advisory Council - Sample Agenda Format D](#)

[Sample - Parent Letter to Introduce Establishment of School Advisory Council](#)

[Sample - Communication for Member Interest in Joining School Advisory Council](#)

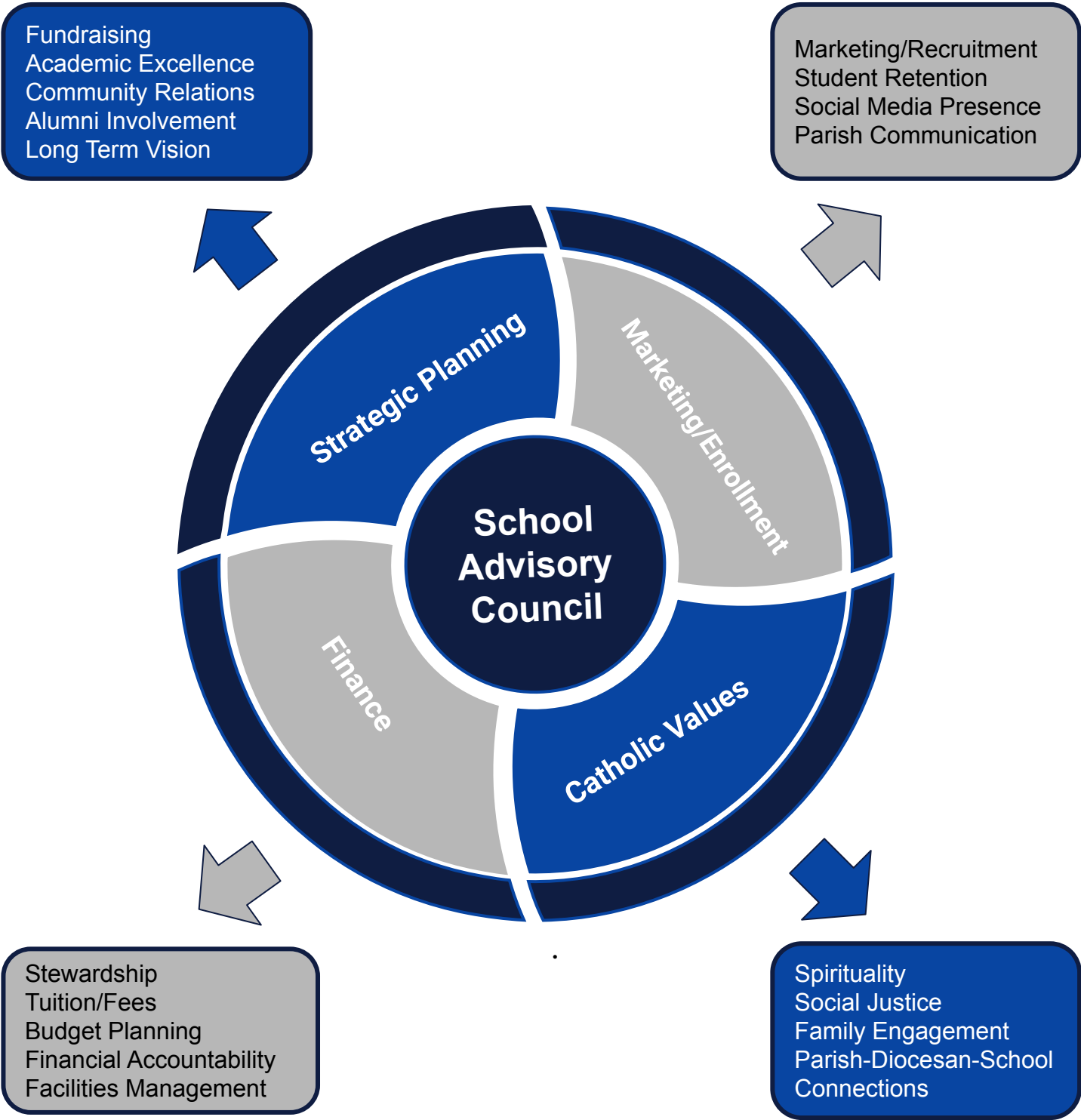
[Sample - Appointment Letter for School Advisory Council Members](#)

[Sample - School Advisory Council Evaluation](#)

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# Example: Committees of a School Advisory Council



# Questions & Answers About a School Advisory Council

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**Q: Why is creating an advisory council important for the growth of a school?**

*A: The School Advisory Council plays a role in supporting the parish priest and principal relationship as a means of building the parish and school community.*

**Q: How do we communicate council meetings and topics with the school community?**

*A: There are several ways to communicate School Advisory Council updates.*

- *School Website: create a dedicated section on your school's website.*
- *School Newsletter: Use your school's newsletter to inform parents and community members of advisory council updates.*
- *Emails: Send out separate emails to parents and community members to inform them of advisory council updates.*

**Q: What is the difference between an advisory council and other board structures that may have decision making power?**

*A: There are many different governing structures from advisory to direct oversight. This guide focuses on advisory only. To learn more about the difference of an advisory council and other board structures: See [FADICA document on Managing School Governance Change](#)*

**Q: What are the responsibilities of the advisory council?**

*A: The responsibilities can differ based on the school. Generally, council members should attend meetings, provide input and feedback, advocate for the school vision and mission and support decision making.*

**Q: Is it better to appoint or elect advisory council members?**

*A: The size and make-up of the school will determine how members are selected. Schools just beginning a council may consider appointing the initial members until the council is fully established.*

**Q: How often should the advisory council meet?**

*A: It is important that the council have a set, consistent meeting schedule. The frequency will depend on the availability of the council members and the overall goals of the council. Advisory councils may have subcommittees that meet more often than the entire council.*

**Q: How is an advisory council different from parent teacher organizations?**

*A: An advisory council is typically a group of individuals who provide guidance on specific matters such as strategic planning, finance, Catholic identity and marketing/enrollment while a PTO is a group of parents and teachers who work together to support the educational experience of students and teachers. This often includes events, volunteer opportunities and fundraisers.*

**Q: Is it required that a member of The Diocese of Cleveland participate on the advisory council?**

*A: It is not required, unless requested by the Bishop's office.*

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