



23 Consultation: A Duty to Perform or a Power to be Mastered?

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Note. – For more information on the various parent participation bodies, the following leaflets are available:

- 1– The Parent Participation Organization, Helping schools be their best!
- 12 – The Governing Board at the Heart of the School
- 14 – The Parents' Committee, Focal Point of Parental Participation
- 15 –Adapting our Schools to Children with Special Needs–The Special Needs Advisory Committee

This information leaflet is intended mainly for parents who are involved in the participation structures of the education network.

The Fédération des comités de parents du Québec (FCPQ) is an organization that brings together parents involved in educational structures. It has the following mission:

- To participate in the development of education with other partners in the school network
- To provide parents with the information and training they need to be able to participate in the school
- To represent and express parents' opinions at the provincial level
- To defend the rights and interests of parents within the school system
- To participate in the development of education with other partners in the school network

Resources

To obtain reference material and to find useful tools or competent resource persons, please contact the FCPPQ.

We offer :

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

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

Acknowledgments

Leaflet No. 23 "Consultation: A Duty to Perform or a Power to be Mastered?" is published as part of the training program of the Fédération des comités de parents du Québec, 389 Boulevard Rochette, Beauport, Québec, G1C 1A4.

Contributors to the Production:

- Coordination, research, text: Multi projets
- Graphics: Groupe Zone Communication
- Printing: Litho Acme-Renaissance

The FCPPQ wishes to thank the people and groups who contributed to the preparation of this document.

February 2003
Legal deposit – 2003
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec
ISBN 2-923-116-00-3

Consultation, little known and little liked!



Acknowledging the positive effects of consultation

Ever since parents were given a say in the decisions being made by schools and school boards, consultation, as it is practiced in the education network, has clearly had a positive effect.

Despite its limitations, consultation:

- Allows people to take a step back and think before taking action
- Fosters better quality decisions
- Contributes in general to identifying solutions that are better adapted to people's situations and needs
- Brings about change

What would the education network be today without the continual contribution of advice, position papers, survey answers and the like? Can you also imagine the significant influential power that consultation exerts over decision-makers before they even submit a proposed change for consultation?

Without doubt, consultation has profoundly affected the development of educational institutions and services.

Consultation is everywhere, and by no means insignificant

Everywhere parents are involved, their advice is solicited, whether we're talking about the Parent Participation Organization, the Governing Board, the Parents' Committee, other advisory bodies, the Council of Commissioners or the structures of the Fédération des comités de parents. This advisory power, in other words the possibility of working with decision-makers at other levels, is recognized and widely used.

Today, parents' representatives can be found at the centre of decision-making bodies such as the Governing Board and the Council of Commissioners. Yet even if parents are now closely involved with the important decisions both at school and at the school board, the advisory power remains just as important. Sooner or later, decisions made at other levels could affect us.



Varying perceptions

We know that consultation produces a variety of reactions. We often tend to underestimate its influence or its power. Or, our expectations are so high when we become involved in this process that, in the end, we are disappointed when the results are made known.

The impression of not having been listened to, of having worked for nothing, of having been consulted as a matter of form or obligation often leads people to withdraw their commitment.

Is it really worth it to invest time and energy in a consultation process? The question must be considered.

What's more, a number of people find that consultation is often a laborious exercise: it lengthens the decision-making process, takes up a substantial amount of energy and eats into parents' available time.

In fact, perceptions vary depending on whether one is the consultant or the one being consulted.

For decision-makers, consultation is just one step in the decision-making process, while for the people involved in advisory structures, influencing decisions seems to be the reason they became involved.

While decision-makers submit to it, albeit apprehensively, parents do not automatically have confidence in the process. But doesn't mutual confidence play an important role in the success of a consultation?

A power to be mastered...in the interests of the students

As we have seen, consultation gives rise to a wide variety of reactions.

In the following pages, we present different aspects of consultation in order to derive the maximum benefit from this real power that is offered to parents in many different circumstances.

Consultation is more than a duty to be performed; it is a real power to be exercised and mastered in the best interests of the students.

What exactly is consultation?

Tentons ici une définition de la consultation et voyons ses principales caractéristiques.

<i>Consultation is a process</i>	Consultation is not a static exercise. Rather, it provokes a series of actions and reactions between the consultant and the party being consulted. It is a process, which the dictionary defines as "a set of actions... in a special order."
<i>by which a body, a group or a person,</i>	The consultation process originates with a decision-maker. In the education network, consultation usually comes from a body such as the Council of Commissioners or the Governing Board. It can come from a group (for example, the parents on a Governing Board) or a person (for example, the Director General or the principal) in regard to powers entrusted to them.
<i>before making a decision,</i>	It must be noted that higher levels also consult decision-making bodies and advisory bodies can in turn consult the people they represent. Also, an elected parent or a Commissioner can privately consult their electors. The timing of the consultation is crucial: it is before a decision is made that the consultation process should take place; between the decision and the action, it is a little late to go back.
<i>solicits and receives</i>	Obviously, solicited advice is not always taken. The proverb "Silence implies consent" may not be valid in the absence of a response to a consultation. However, failure to respond often severs all links with the consulting party and weakens the right to intercede afterwards.
<i>advice</i>	The advice can take different forms: recommendations, position papers, answers to a questionnaire or a survey, participation in a discussion group, address to a parliamentary commission or a traveling commission, etc.
<i>from persons</i>	This can take the form of surveys, inquiries, interviews, etc.
<i>or from a body established to advise it</i>	All bodies on which parents participate have this advisory function as provided by law or by government regulation. Advisory bodies are established to give advice within the framework of a consultation as it has been defined here. They can also act on their own initiative and issue unsolicited advice that relates to the functions entrusted to them by law.

The extent of consultation powers

Educational bodies do not have unlimited functions and powers. Not every body has the right to advise every other group. Therefore, an advisory body should not give advice to just anyone on just any subject. The legislature has determined the areas of competency for each advisory body it has established. In some cases, in particular that of the Parents' Committee, it has drawn up a list of mandatory subjects for consultation. In addition, it has plotted the lines of communication between consultants and the persons being consulted.

The chart below shows the extent and the limits of the consultation functions and powers of each body that has some parent involvement.

Consultation functions and powers

Who	Can consult	Is consult by	Mandatory on	Advise on	On
PPO	The parents of the school	The parents on the GB		The parents on the GB	Any matter of concern to parents or concerning which the organization is consulted by the GB (Education Act, s. 96(3))
Governing Board (GB)	* See note 3	The principal The School Board	The choice of textbooks and instructional material (s. 96(15)) The school's material requirements (s. 96(22)) The deed of establishment The selection criteria for the appointment of the principal (s. 79)	The School Board	Any matter likely to - facilitate the operation of the school - improve the organization of the services provided by the School Board (s. 78)
Daycare Parents Committee	Users of the service	Users of the service		The principal	Any matter related to the service. (See the Regulation respecting childcare services provided at school.)
Parents' Committee	The parents on the GB	The School Board	9 matters prescribed by the Education Act (s.193)	The School Board	Any matter conducive to the most efficient operation possible of the School Board (s. 192(2)) The needs of parents (s. 192(3))
SNAC	* See note 3	The School Board	- agreement for provision of instructional services (s. 213) - exemption from school attendance (s. 15(2))	The School Board	- Policy for the organization of services to special needs students - Allocation of financial resources - Implementation of an individualized education plan (s. 187)
Advisory Committee on Student Transportation	* See note 3			The School Board	Any matter related to student transportation. (See the Regulation respecting student transportation.)
FCPQ	Parents' Committee Regional departments			The MEQ and others	Any matter related to the mission of this organization

1. In this chart, the acronyms refer to the following bodies: Parent Participation Organization (PPO); Governing Board (GB); Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC); Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (MEQ); Fédération des comités de parents du Québec (FCPQ).

2. The sections cited are from the Education Act.

3. In the multiparty bodies (GB, SNAC, Advisory Committee on Student Transportation), the members may consult the group or the body who appointed them.

Consultation : A time to reflect before making a decision



There are several steps in the decision-making process. We have reduced them here to five essential steps.

- 1- Analyse the situation: clarify expectations or needs (e.g.: new rules for student conduct), gather information, identify problematic situations, look for the causes of the identified problems, assess solutions already contemplated or implemented, etc.
- 2- Formulate hypotheses for a solution: explore solutions to identified problems and their causes, eliminate unsatisfactory hypotheses, regroup the hypotheses, select hypotheses to submit for consultation, etc.

The best time for consultation is, necessarily, before a decision is made. Decision-makers must pause in their process to make room for consultation. .

Consultation

- 3- Decide: the decision-maker chooses a solution.
- 4- Implement: carry out or apply the chosen solution.
- 5- Evaluate: gather new information, analyse the results, etc.

Participation that goes beyond consultation

Often, participation goes beyond the consultation stage in the sense that parents are invited to become involved at different stages of the decision-making process. For example, a working committee may be formed where parents take part in analysing the situation and formulating hypotheses or when it is time to evaluate. This is not, properly speaking, part of the consultation process.

Another example of participation that goes beyond consultation is the situation of parent-commissioners who, as members of the Council of Commissioners, are involved in decision-making since they may intervene at the very moment a decision is being made, even though they are not entitled to vote.

A consultation calendar

An advisory body often finds itself at the mercy of the decision-making body when it is time to plan its activities. It is essential that the decision-making body provide the advisory body with a calendar of its requests for advice. This calendar would allow for adequate preparation, a more intelligent distribution of tasks among the members and a better balance between consultation and the advisory body's other duties.

Once the school or the school board's anticipated requests for advice are known, the committee or the council can better plan the advice it wants to issue on its own initiative

Conditions for success ... when consulting

1. Establish the objectives

It is important to put the consultation into perspective and to state explicitly the reasons for soliciting advice.

2. Define the content

What the request involves must be very clear. It is best to define the limits of the consultation, even what constitutes inadmissible advice.

3. Supply information

Complete information is indispensable to getting good results from the consultation. Insufficient information may bias the answers to a question. On the other hand, too much information may discourage or create confusion.

4. Allow a reasonable time frame

The target date for delivering advice should allow the group in its turn to consult the people it represents.

5. Specify the type of response you want

Without interfering with the free expression of those being consulted, it is a good idea to specify how the consultation response should be presented: recommendation, position paper, oral or written notice, response to a questionnaire, etc.

6. Analyse the advice received

The advice received must be accessible to decision-makers. A consultation report may be useful, but it may also be the basis of a poor interpretation of the advice received.

7. Relay the outcome of the process

Once the decision has been made, providing feedback to the consulted parties shows respect and reinforces their feelings of being part of the process. Conversely, omitting this step can give the impression that the advice has not been taken into consideration.

In short, you have to do everything possible to inspire confidence in the consultation process.



Conditions for success ... when being consulted

1. Know the objectives

Know the consultant's intentions, the list of groups being consulted, the general framework that has been set up, etc.: so many things to find out before taking part in a consultation.

2. Take into account the limits

It is usually of no use to go beyond the limits established by the consultant and it may even be detrimental. However, abusive limits must be denounced.

3. Take charge of the information

If the information received seems incomplete, clarifications or additional information can be requested before any action is taken.

4. Respect deadlines

You may request additional time before issuing advice, as long as you make sure this will not adversely affect the advice or the decision.

5. Stay within the established framework

It is usually preferable to stay within the established framework rather than to contest it from the outset. For example, if you are asked to fill in a questionnaire and you submit a position paper instead, chances are it will just sit on the shelf.

6. Exercise care in your communications

Advice is accepted if it is based on sound, well-researched arguments, if the opinions it expresses are substantiated, if it appeals to decision-makers in an objective tone and avoids personal attacks, if it proposes solutions that benefit all concerned (a win/win situation) and if it is presented in a professional format.

7. Request feedback on the consultation

An advisory committee always has the right to request feedback regarding the consultation if the consultant has not already addressed this issue. This step shows that committee members take their work seriously and demonstrates that their involvement on the next occasion is important.

In short, you have to build a solid reputation and maintain it.



Questions and answers



Does consultation on mandatory matters have to take place every year?

The Education Act does not mention the time frame concerning consultation on mandatory matters. It is certain that the school board or the principal cannot make changes that affect a matter requiring consultation without first consulting the body concerned.

It would be desirable to come to an agreement with administrators on a consultation calendar that would respect the legal requirements to the satisfaction of both parties.

What happens if a school board or a principal does not consult on a matter that requires consultation?

The courts have considered the validity of decisions in which the legal rules regarding consultation were not respected, and they have rendered very clear judgments on this issue. The absence of consultation on a mandatory matter prescribed in the Act may even render invalid the decision in question. Moreover, if the minimum conditions have not been established in carrying out this consultation, a court may ask the competent authority to recommence the decision-making process so that the group or groups that must be consulted according to the terms of the Act are consulted in a satisfactory manner.

Who has the power to consult parents?

The Act does not give a direct answer to this question. Several bodies may claim to have the power to consult the parents in their community: school boards, which are responsible for providing educational services to the population, principals, who administer the school and the quality of the educational services, Governing Boards, whose role is to encourage the participation of all concerned, PPOs, which are expected to promote the collaboration of parents on the educational project and even the Parents' Committees, whose mission is to represent parents at the school boards, to name a few.

It is understandable that all these bodies and many others cannot take advantage of the right to consult parents via the school and the students without upsetting school operations. An integrated approach is required. As it happens, everything that goes on in the school is the principal's responsibility, so no consultation of parents that uses the students as intermediaries should take place without the principal's explicit consent. For the rest, each case is judged on merit.

How is the consultation response delivered?

There are no rules about how to forward advice after a consultation. However, every milieu has its own traditions or ways of doing things. Usually, documents are sent through administrative channels. For example, advice from the Governing Board is forwarded to the school board by the principal; advice from the Parents' Committee is forwarded to the Secretary General, the Director General or to the person who requested the advice through the Chair or the committee secretary. It is helpful to ask and find out about the procedure to be followed.

When the advice is to be presented in person to a policy-making body such as the Council of Commissioners, this must be done by the Chair of the Parents' Committee or of the Governing Board.

You may also inform another body of your advice. However, this becomes a politically strategic issue, and it is advisable to consider carefully before taking this step.

Some tips on what to do ...and what not to do!



- Consultation should be planned: ask for a consultation plan or calendar so you can better make provisions for your interventions.
- Think of consultation as an act of communication.
- Contact the people involved; say thank you, it doesn't cost a lot!
- Remember that people don't want to read long documents: be concise.
- Prepare your message with care: in education, high-quality written language is greatly appreciated.
- Find resources that can help you with more difficult tasks such as writing a position paper, making financial recommendations, etc.
- Note that a consultation response is strengthened by appropriate political action.
- Mistrust is rarely a good advisor.
- Consultation just for show is a blight that should be eradicated as soon as it appears!

Consultation, the power to influence

In a political system such as ours where we are represented by elected officials, ordinary citizens often are aware that decisions are made without necessarily taking into consideration the needs and interests of the people actually involved in the situations; other imperatives, be they economic, political or social, influence decision-makers.

Given this fact, consultation is a precious tool for developing a true democracy. It gives people affected by a decision the chance to influence or even change the decision.

By taking part in a consultation, we remind our elected officials that they are there to represent us. And isn't it always true that, to re-write an old saying, "Several heads are better than one"?

Consultation is an opportunity for personal or organizational growth when it allows people to:

- Reflect on the issues
- Challenge preconceived notions
- Broaden their perceptions
- Explore new avenues
- Improve their and others' decisions;
- Contribute to developing the educational services provided to students and to improving the quality of life of the whole community.

