



19 The Role of Secretary: At the Heart of the Action

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This information leaflet is about committee secretaries and writing records and minutes of meetings. It is primarily intended for parents who are asked to fulfil this task within the framework of the parental participation structures in schools, school boards and regional or FCPQ structures. To learn more about the various participation groups, you can consult the leaflets already produced by the FCPQ, in particular:

- No. 1, Parent Participation Organization, Helping schools be their best!
- No. 12, The Governing Board at the Heart of the School
- No. 14, The Parents' Committee - Focal Point of Parental Participation
- No. 15, Adapting our Schools to Children with Special Needs - The Special Needs Advisory Committee

Resources

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

We offer :

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

References

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Taking on the role of secretary of a committee



The role of secretary:
a good place to learn!

- Who raised a hand at the first committee meeting to offer to be the secretary?
The person who really wanted to be at the heart of the action.

- Who kept eyes down, looking over papers, while the group sought a volunteer to take notes?

The person who did not see, beyond the secretary's extra duties, a unique opportunity to step up to the plate to ensure the committee's success.

Taking on the role of secretary is not just about doing more work: the people who take on the secretarial duties enjoy undeniable personal side-benefits. They can increase their skills, gain self-confidence and learn to be at ease in a group.

In order to properly carry out its mission, a committee has to depend on a person who is ready to take on the challenge of the secretarial role. Without this key person who assures the committee's efficiency and continuity, sooner or later the committee will break down.

Great diversity of situations

Considering the significant differences in this function from one organization to another, it is not easy to establish a single model for the role of secretary. To name just a few, there are elected secretaries and those who are picked for the occasion, permanent and temporary secretaries, salaried and volunteer secretaries. There is even a Secretary of the Cabinet, the highest-level functionary in the machinery of government.

The nature of a committee itself results in differences in how the role is carried out.

In the education environment, we find a great variety of situations in which parents are asked to take on the role of secretary.

- **The annual General Assembly** is the first opportunity for a parent to become secretary. The minutes of this assembly will be useful throughout the year as a reminder of parents' expectations, and again when it is time to prepare the next assembly.
- **The Parent Participation Organization**, a structure made up exclusively of parents and completely autonomous, requires secretarial continuity in order to operate effectively.
- **The Governing Board** is a special case because the Education Act entrusts the principal or a person designated by the principal with the recording of the minutes in a register kept for that purpose. In many cases, staff takes on this duty. A parent sometimes volunteers to help the principal by taking notes, while the principal remains responsible for writing the minutes. When a parent is in



charge of writing the minutes, he/she must take into account the rules of operation and internal management adopted by the Governing Board as well as the principal's responsibilities in preparing reports and carrying out follow-ups to the meetings.

- **The Parents' Committee** also has to depend on secretarial continuity. Considering their size, some committees entrust this function to a salaried person.
- **The Executive Committee of the Parents' Committee** is an unofficial organ, which has much to gain by having a secretary and entrusting this responsibility to the person who is also secretary of the Parents' Committee.
- **Other school board advisory committees**, such as the Advisory Committee on Student Transportation and the Special Needs Advisory Committee, have a secretarial position that is usually assumed by the related school board departments.
- **Regional structures involving parents** depend on permanent staff to carry out secretarial tasks.
- **Sub-committees**, occasional or permanent, support the work of the above bodies. It is essential that these groups preserve records of their proceedings, and this responsibility would fall to the secretary.

Rules of internal management

Most of the groups mentioned above adopt rules of internal management. The formulation of these rules is an opportunity to establish what is expected of the secretary.

In the following pages you will find a number of tasks that can be entrusted to the secretary or taken on by another person. The rules of internal management thus become the secretary's guide to the scope of his/her role.

Why a committee secretary?

Be a witness, facilitate follow-up action and help prepare members

The role of a committee secretary is an important responsibility that can also prove gratifying for the person assuming it. Mandated by their peers to report the latter's proposals and ideas, as well as committee decisions, secretaries must be deserving of the confidence shown in them.

This function is important for three main reasons. First, committee secretaries make available in an official form, the recommendations or the decisions made by the committee and help inform others of the committee's work.

Second, the document written by the secretary will serve to plan the follow-up action on decisions, making it easier to orchestrate interventions and help committee members.

Third, the notes are the committee's memory. Secretaries disprove the saying, "Memory is a faculty that forgets." Everyone has access to up-to-date information and can better prepare for the next meeting by referring to the committee's previous work.

Improve the quality of
committee work

Secretaries also contribute to the quality of the committee's work, because they organize the ideas expressed, distinguish important ideas from less important ones and objectively formulate that which often is said with emotion. They may even find the way to express an idea in a more acceptable manner. It is said that a good secretary sometimes manages to express a committee's ideas better than the committee itself!

The duties of a committee secretary

The secretary should mainly support the members of the committee and its work. The duties usually taken on by the secretary are the following:

- Take notes during meetings;
- Write minutes or a record of proceedings after each meeting;
- Write, receive and save committee correspondence;
- Keep the register of minutes;
- Preserve official committee documents;
- Produce copies of resolutions or extracts of minutes, as needed.

Other responsibilities may also be added:

Time management...

- Issue notices of meeting, prepare the agenda and other documents that will be useful for the committee meeting;
- Ensure background material is prepared for members;
- See to the appropriate preparation of the meeting room;
- Check that the time chosen for the meeting is the most suitable by ascertaining the availability of the greatest possible number of participants;
- Notify members of meetings, leaving a sufficient amount of time to allow everyone to become familiar with preparatory documents;
- Act as timekeeper during the meeting by ensuring the time is used effectively in accordance with the procedures and time forecasts determined with the Chair;
- Assist in the work of the Chair: preparing files, following up decisions, handling correspondence, etc.

Because time is money!



- Take part in writing advice, recommendations or position papers in the case of advisory bodies.

The description of the duties entrusted to the secretary should normally be written in the committee's rules of internal management.

Preliminary work

The secretary can be asked to play an important role in preparing a meeting and thereby provide valuable assistance to the Chair. Together, they can also prepare the agenda and the list of people to be convened, put the finishing touches on the notice of meeting and see to the material preparation of the meeting.

The secretary can also help committee members by making available to them the information needed for proposed discussions and for decision-making. Besides the notice of meeting and the agenda, two different types of documents can more specifically serve to prepare members: the minutes of the last meeting and the documents directly relating to agenda items.

Convening participants

The notice of meeting sent out by the secretary and the Chair is an invitation to members to hold a meeting. It contains information relative to the meeting (recipients, date, place, time, subject), the plan of discussion (agenda or work plan) as well as the documents having to do with each agenda item.

The notice of meeting itself or the word from the Chair that accompanies it can help to motivate participants to attend and to prepare accordingly. It can remind them of the importance of the meeting in terms of the consequences it will occasion.

Following the notice of meeting, the agenda (sometimes called the work plan) presents the ordered list of items under study, beginning with those that are repeated at each meeting, such as the *Call to order*, *Adoption of the agenda* and *Adoption of the minutes* of the previous session. Some groups add the handling of Correspondence along with an *Information period* intended to bring participants up to date on interesting events. For example you could, at this time, indicate the holding of a public hearing or the publication of a new policy that might interest members. Other groups prefer to address these last two items later in the meeting, after *New business*.

The other agenda items are dealt with in order of priority to avoid having to postpone an important issue to a later session.



The agenda usually includes an item identified as *Closing* or *Adjournment*. It is immediately preceded by *Varia*, an item that allows members to add any other unexpected subject at the beginning of the meeting. A *Public question period* can also be added at this point if the assembly sits in public and if this item is not already listed at the beginning of the session; an item concerning the evaluation of the meeting by participants is also placed here.

Time frame for convening a meeting

The notice of meeting should be sent to members within the time frame required by the committee. To allow time to read all the documents sent, a minimum period of seven to ten days is optimal for a regular meeting and a minimum of two to five days for a special meeting. A phone call or email may serve as notice of meeting.

The time allowed for members to prepare should take into account the quantity and the complexity of the issues to be dealt with, the professional occupation of each member and the number of meetings planned for the year. Usually, these conditions should be written in the committee's rules of internal management.

Taking notes

The most important work a secretary does occurs during the assembly, not after, as we are often led to believe.

Some tips to help you be more comfortable

The secretary should have a good workspace at the meeting table where the documents can be placed so they are easily accessible when needed. Whether you are a participant or a secretary, you need a solid support on which to take notes. Using a notebook helps keep notes in one place so the user can find things easily from one meeting to another.

Preparing ahead

To be better able to concentrate on discussions, the secretary uses a notebook with lined pages and writes the number and title of each agenda item in advance, in the order of discussion. The secretary's notes will be taken under these headings.

What should I take notes on?

It is usually considered better to take more notes than less, especially when it is your first experience or when there are several items on the agenda. In most cases, the secretary notes the essential points of the ideas expressed and not the word for word discussions. Remember that you are looking for the essential rather than the incidental. However, for a resolution, the exact wording must be respected.

Mosvick and Nelson (1988) state that secretaries should, in particular, note such items as the following:

- The reasoning that led to the decision, especially the main supporting arguments and facts;

- The main conclusions in regard to each agenda item of the meeting;
- The measures to be taken to implement the decision, specifying the responsibility given to each member and the deadlines set.

Learning to make summaries



One of the secretary's important tasks is to record in the minutes, summaries that will serve to express the outcome of discussions. This requires good listening skills, objectivity, understanding and the ability to summarize major points.

The aim of the summary is to make a message accessible by presenting the basic points in such a way that a person who was absent can understand what actually happened and what was decided. The goal is to exclude the unnecessary parts of a dialogue.

In addition, secretaries can help a group along if they are able to formulate a summary of discussions during debates.

Three important steps provide guidance when preparing a summary: understanding the subject, sorting out the ideas and writing the text.

Understanding the subject

To get a clear understanding of the discussion and the ensuing decision, secretaries must have a good command of the content of the written documents tabled or submitted to the assembly by the Chair. They should become very familiar with a document handed out ahead of time. To understand the content of the message means to pick out the main idea by answering the following questions: What is the text or the paper about? What does the author want us to understand? What subject does the author stress? In a written document, the secretary's attention should be directed to the title, the starting point of the message, the logical sequence of ideas and the conclusion. Secretaries can pick out important elements from the reference material ahead of time, underline them and use them to introduce this item in the record or minutes.

Sorting the information

To sort means to distinguish the essential from the incidental, retaining in the message that which supports the reasoning and leads to the conclusion. To sort, by distinguishing the incidental, also means to eliminate examples, illustrations, overly precise remarks and details, along with personal comments and opinions. To lighten the summary, it is also important for secretaries to identify elements from the initial text to avoid. Among the most important are the following:



- Repetitions that do not provide new information;
- References that are not informative on the content of the ideas;
- Out of context figures that lead to confusion;
- Illustrations and tables that are too detailed;
- Obvious facts and examples that unnecessarily lengthen the summary;
- Comments that do not reflect the thinking of the group;
- The secretary's personal interpretations.

Now it's time to write

Remember that the summary, like any other official document from a group or organization, is a text that will be read by people who were not present during the discussions. Therefore, it should faithfully reflect the discussions and be understandable with no other explanation.

To write a summary of a discussion means to faithfully summarize the major points of the document or of the initial presentation of the agenda item, while demonstrating an objective understanding.

A simple and direct style

The secretary's writing style should be consistent and in good taste throughout. Sentences should be simple. Short paragraphs of two to five sentences are better than long paragraphs in which the train of thought is quickly lost. Use of adjectives, though not forbidden, is tricky. In fact, adding an adjective to qualify an actual situation involves subjective perception. Use of certain verbs should be monitored. For example, it is better to write, "a member said..." than "a member admitted..." even if the person seems to be speaking confidentially.

Nevertheless, the minutes should attract the reader's interest with its lively style. We hardly need to point out that appropriate vocabulary is preferable to more colourful, but less precise, language.

Use of abbreviations

Abbreviations are frequently used to designate organizations, associations or committees. To avoid confusion, secretaries should always write, at least the first time, the full name of the firm, organization or association and follow it with its abbreviation, in brackets.

Use of synonyms

Synonyms also liven up an administrative text. In general, certain words reappear frequently: member, say, idea, document, text, proposal, vote, and so on. To avoid repetition, it is sometimes helpful to use synonyms. For example, for the word "say" you can use the terms "tell," "express," "state" or other verbs. These synonyms have quite the same meaning as the verb "say," and using them breaks the monotony.

The precision and accuracy of a report are often the result of using simple little tricks gained from experience. For example, how do you take account of several divergent ideas? How do you allow for all these ideas without adversely affecting



the understanding and the simplicity of the text?

In these situations, secretaries can make a list of the ideas without trying to express them in complete sentences. A summary of discussions filled with personalized quotes will lead to interminable debates when presented for adoption. If only a few of the arguments raised during the discussion are mentioned, make sure to indicate this ("We emphasized in particular that... We stressed, in part, that...").

You can also put in a reference to the text of a document that has been tabled or is under study; adding this reference can provide even greater accuracy and often eliminate doubt concerning the truth of the reported facts.

Writing resolutions

Writing resolutions is a special case. They must be concise, unambiguous and complete in themselves. There is a tendency, particularly in advisory committee recommendations, to make use of words like "considering" or "whereas". These words may be useful, even necessary to make the message understood. Too many such words, however, are tedious for the reader and discredit the essential points. If you have numerous messages to convey and arguments to put forward, it would be better to publish a position paper.

It helps to write the resolution or the recommendation ahead of time. The group may agree in some cases to adopt the body of the resolution, leaving the secretary to write the preamble. However, this practice involves some risks.

Tabling documents

It is not necessary to write in the minutes a summary of each document tabled. There is reason though to clearly identify the document in question and to give its reference, especially if there is a risk of confusion with a prior or upcoming edition or version. You can add a comment, agreed upon by the group, if you think it will be useful in future.

Minutes, records, memoranda, etc.

All educational organizations have their own way of working when it comes to the role of secretary. In some instances, operating procedures are prescribed by the Education Act. For instance, the Act indicates how to keep the minutes of the Council of Commissioners and the Governing Board. In other cases, rules of internal management or general regulations prescribe particular procedures about what can be called the memory of the organization.

Minutes of committee meetings

The minutes are a good way to ensure the continuity of a committee's actions. As a reference document, the minutes ensure that there is more cohesiveness and efficiency in pursuing committee activities.

The nature of minutes

The minutes are mainly intended to express the group's ideas, recommendations or decisions. To make events understandable, the writer has to include enough information so that target readers can make their own interpretations, for example, who was present, the time of the meeting, the opinions, ideas, recommendations and conclusions expressed. In short, the goal of the minutes is to recall, as faithfully and as objectively as possible, the events that occurred and to set forth the relevant conclusions.

Steps to remember

The easiest way to write the minutes is to follow the same sequence as the meeting. Four categories of items should be included:

- Basic information (theme of the meeting, date and place of meeting, members present and absent, etc.);
- Presentation and reminder of the context of each decision, if necessary;
- Main ideas, recommendations or conclusions, numbered so they can be distinguished from each other; they can also be presented in short paragraphs;
- Actions to be taken, each person's responsibilities and prescribed deadlines.

This short plan highlights the simplicity of the minutes, both in content and in form.



The description of a committee's discussions, recommendations and decisions is especially important because it testifies to the quality of its work. The document that results from transcribing these events is the image the group projects to the outside world.

The practice of distributing minutes as though they were newsletters is not recommended. The minutes are not a means of communication, but rather a work tool that belongs to the committee. They include items concerning committee operations and internal events that are not necessarily of interest to the general public. With word processing, it is now possible to produce both the minutes of a meeting and a summary of the committee's news that you want to distribute.

Records and minutes of meetings

Minutes, the committee's memory

The objective of records and minutes of meetings is to reflect as faithfully and objectively as possible what is said during a meeting.

Minutes, an official document

Minutes are an instrument for recording the debates and decisions of a decision-making body. They require a rigorous and systematic style. Some committees are not required to keep official minutes, but must keep a written record or report of their proceedings.

Model of minutes (extracts)

WORD FROM THE CHAIR

At the invitation of the Chair, the Director General stated that as part of its commitment to adult education, the School Board wanted to develop courses on parenting skills and would like one or two parents to sit on the working committee. Mrs. Thompson invited interested parties to give their names.

She mentioned the training session for Governing Board Chairs that will take place on December 5. She reported she had received a pamphlet entitled *Un double saut, non périlleux! Le début de l'adolescence et de l'école secondaire Guide pour Les parents* produced by the Regional Board for health and social services.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Adoption of budget provisions
Mrs. Lucy Davoli presented the Parents' Committee budget for 2002-2003. She noted that the amount available includes the \$16 500 allocated by the School Board for this year and the surplus accumulated in previous years. Mrs. Thompson noted the purchase of FCPQ leaflets to be included in the Representative's Guide.

It was suggested that for next year we add a column indicating the previous year's expenses.

Resolution No. GB-035-11-02

It was proposed by Mr. Sun Lee, seconded by Mr. Jim Bancroft, that the budget for 2002-2003 be adopted as presented.
The proposal was adopted unanimously.

ADOPTION OF A PARENTS' COMMITTEE PLAN OF ACTION

Mrs. Thompson recalled the concerns raised by members at the last meeting of the Parents' Committee and noted that the proposed plan of action takes these concerns into consideration. She presented the plan of action for 2002-2003 as well as the School Board's operational planning that is an integral part of the plan of action. Mrs. Singh pointed out that during the year, the plan of action is adjusted on the basis of new needs. She added that point 7.11 School Success Plans in the School Board's planning should be examined in greater detail in order to answer the questions raised earlier.

Resolution No. GB-036-11-02

It was proposed by Mrs. Helen Turner, seconded by Mrs. Aline Tanguay, that the plan of action for 2002-2003 be adopted with the following modification:

Under the first objective we add the point Organize a conference on the problems and issues concerning boys.

The proposal was adopted unanimously.



In some cases, the minutes should be written by a secretary who does not take part in the discussions being recorded, although this is not always possible. Certain rules of presentation must be respected when writing: strict framework, precisely chosen terms and consistency in the information that must be included. The minutes must also be approved by the members of the assembly and be filed in chronological order, in a specific place a book or a register. Finally, the minutes can serve as a reference document in case of dispute.

Compendium of resolutions

Traditionally, some committees have kept, in a compendium, extracts of minutes or copies of resolutions made during the meetings. This type of compendium cannot take the place of the committee's minutes. Current word processing tools allow us to easily keep a computer copy of these documents and produce an extract of the minutes when required. Therefore, keeping a compendium is no longer necessary.

The memorandum

The memorandum is a monitoring document. It serves to remind people of the responsibilities, tasks and deadlines agreed on during the meeting and to facilitate the management and supervision of the actions planned.

This is the simplest formula to use for each meeting. It includes only the "who does what?" and some other useful information for carrying on the work. It really does not require any complex writing process, summary of discussions or the like. It is well suited to a working group or a sub-committee that, at the end of a few meetings, will have to provide a complete report to the organization from which it received its mandate.

The report of the working group or sub-committee

In the case of a specific mandate entrusted to a working group, the minutes or final report should make reference to the mandate, specifying the date the group was formed, the names of the members and the person who took the chair. For this part, you should refer to the official documents of the organization responsible for the mandate: minutes, official letter specifying the mandate and other documents. Following that, the group can give a progress report. The secretary can then give an account of the meetings held, the expertise sought and the steps taken, or even the work method used. In some circumstances, especially when the group had to limit its work, the secretary can mention the difficulties encountered and the obstacles overcome. This part of the report allows you to measure the amount and the quality of the work accomplished.

In the case of a
specific mandate...

Preserve documents to keep vital links with the past ...



One of the secretary's principal tasks has to do with preserving documents. These reflect the past and the present and are a heritage for the future.

It is important to focus special attention on this aspect of the secretary's role, particularly in the educational milieu. In fact, we can but deplore the sorry state of school archives. Many schools have no documentary resource material to testify to their past. It is impossible, when it is not a matter of essential official documents, to retrace the events that marked the school's history and made the school what it is today.

Committee secretaries, whoever they are, must preserve the documents given to them by their predecessors. They must make the documents accessible, in accordance with the rules regarding access to information and protection of privacy. By the same token, at the end of their mandate, they must hand everything over to their successors, to the school principal or to the Secretary General of the school board, where applicable.

Must committee secretary possess certain special qualities?

Taking on the role of secretary of a committee requires certain skills: an ability to listen, a facility for understanding, an aptitude for summarizing major points and an ability to write clearly and articulately. We also look for other important qualities in a good secretary, such as autonomy, transparency, attention to detail and discretion.

Autonomy

This quality allows secretaries to be discriminating when they begin to write minutes. Moreover, during committee meetings, the secretary's work will be even more appreciated if he/she is able to correctly restate an idea to help clarify it or propose an original summary of events that members agree with.

Transparency

A committee's success almost always resides in its ability to share and use the information possessed by its members. Secretaries can have a positive effect on the communication process if they inform members of how work is progressing



whenever the discussion requires it. They do not work "behind people's backs" and never permit themselves to favour one member or one sub-group to the detriment of the others. This kind of behaviour would undermine the secretary's credibility. The information secretaries possess should be made available to everyone, under the best possible conditions.

Attention to detail

Secretaries are expected to be able to act efficiently and with attention to detail. They should be able to produce comprehensive, accurate and high-quality records with precision and speed. Secretaries have to be organized and meticulous when filing documents.

Listening and discretion

The secretary's role requires active listening. Secretaries understand, help to restate issues and become the mirror of the group. It is not surprising that members of the group often confide in them. In these circumstances, secretaries must be extremely cautious not to hurt anyone and to keep their trust. Secretaries must also be very discrete because they are party to secret deliberations. Secretaries who are too talkative don't get very far. They should not use confidential information for personal gain.

Reconciling the secretarial role and personal participation

Parents seldom volunteer for a group with the idea of becoming secretary. They come out of interest, or are elected or nominated. Does agreeing to take on the role of secretary deprive them of their rights to participate in the same capacity as other members? Not at all. The secretary's job does not come with a gag order!

On the contrary, through their involvement in preparing the meetings, formulating the group's thoughts and preserving documents, secretaries usually have more extensive information than the average members. Therefore, it is their duty to contribute accordingly. But that does not mean they don't have their own ideas. They should enjoy equal rights with the other members.

If they take sides in a debate, they must nevertheless be impartial when it comes to writing. They should not show any bias or any discomfort in stating their own arguments along with those of other participants.

This approach is especially important in committees formed of representatives from different groups. It is the duty of secretaries to represent the group that elected them with the same eagerness and concern for the electors as if they were not secretaries.

Some people fear that becoming secretary may keep them from participating fully in discussions or from promoting an idea or a project that, as it happens, motivated them to join the committee. These are the people who tend to stare at their papers when the group begins looking for a volunteer to fulfil this role. It's too bad, because the position of secretary would really keep them at the heart of the action.

Concern for the past and faith in the future

Accepting the position of secretary of a committee is an added commitment that requires real belief in the role. Secretaries have enough confidence in the committee to devote additional hours to preserving the records of its past and preparing for its future.

They respect the heritage of the group.
They believe in working together.
They enjoy the dynamics between people.
They believe in the power to change things.
They believe in the future.

