

Fact Sheet No 1. School council elections – Information for parents

What is a school council and what does it do?

All government schools in Victoria have a school council. They are legally constituted bodies that are given powers to set the broad directions of a school in accordance with their constituting Order and the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*. In doing this, a school council is able to directly influence the quality of education that the school provides for its students.

Who is on the school council?

For most primary school councils, there are three possible categories of membership:

- A mandated elected Parent member category – more than one-third of the total members must be from this category. DET employees can be Parent members at their child's school as long as they are not engaged in work at the school
- A mandated elected DET employee member category – members of this category may make up no more than one-third of the total membership of school council. The principal of the school is automatically one of these members
- An optional Community member category – members are co-opted by a decision of the council because of their special skills, interests or experiences. DET employees are not eligible to be Community members.

For all schools with a year 7 and above cohort, there is a fourth category of membership:

- A mandated elected Student member category, 2 positions.

Generally, the term of office for all members is two years. The term of office of half the members expires each year, creating vacancies for the annual school council elections.

Why is parent membership so important?

Parents on school councils provide important viewpoints and have valuable skills that can help inform and shape the direction of the school.

Those parents who become active on a school council find their involvement satisfying and may also find that their children feel a greater sense of belonging.

Do I need special experience to be on school council?

Each member brings their own valuable life skills and knowledge to the role. However, councillors may need to develop skills and acquire knowledge in areas that are unfamiliar to them. What you do need is an interest in your child's school and the desire to work in partnership with others to help shape the school's future.

Code of conduct for school councillors

School councils in Victoria are public entities as defined by the *Public Administration Act 2004*. School councillors must abide by the *Code of Conduct – Employees* issued by the Victorian Public Sector Commission. The Code of Conduct is based on the Victorian public sector values and requires councillors to:

- **act with honesty and integrity** (be truthful, open and clear about their motives and declare any real, potential or perceived conflict of interest and duty)
- **act in good faith** in the best interests of the school (work cooperatively with other councillors and the school community, be reasonable, and make all decisions with the best interests of students foremost in their minds)
- **act fairly and impartially** (consider all relevant facts of an issue before making a decision, seek to have a balanced view, never give special treatment to a person or group and never act from self interest)
- **use information appropriately** (respect confidentiality and use information for the purpose for which it was made available)
- **exercise due care, diligence and skill** (accept responsibility for decisions and do what is best for the school)
- **use the position appropriately** (not use the position as a councillor to gain an advantage)
- **act in a financially responsible manner** (observe all the above principles when making financial decisions)
- **comply with relevant legislation and policies** (know what legislation and policies are relevant for which decisions and obey the law)
- **demonstrate leadership and stewardship** (set a good example, encourage a culture of accountability, manage risks effectively, exercise care and responsibility to keep the school strong and sustainable).

Indemnity for school council members

School councillors are indemnified against any liability in respect of any loss or damage suffered by the council or any other person in respect of anything necessarily or reasonably done, or omitted to be done by the councillor in good faith in:

- a) the exercise of a power or the performance of a function of a councillor, or
- b) the reasonable belief that the act or omission was in the exercise of a power or the performance of a function of a council.

In other words, school councillors are not legally liable for any loss or damage suffered by council or others as a result of reasonable actions taken in good faith.

How can you become involved?

The most obvious way is to vote in the school council elections, which are held in Term 1 each year. However, ballots are only held if more people nominate as candidates than there are positions vacant.

In view of this, you might consider:

- standing for election as a member of the school council
- encouraging another person to stand for election.

What do you need to do to stand for election?

The principal will issue a Notice of Election and Call for Nominations following the commencement of Term 1 each year. All school council elections must be completed by the end of March unless the usual time line has been varied by the Minister.

If you decide to stand for election, you can arrange for someone to nominate you as a candidate or you can nominate yourself in the Parent member category.

DET employees whose child is enrolled in a school in which they are not engaged in work, are eligible to nominate for Parent membership of the school council at that school.

Once the nomination form is completed, return it to the principal within the time stated on the Notice of Election. You will receive a Nomination Form Receipt via post, email or by hand following the receipt of your completed nomination.

If there are more nominations received than there are vacancies on council, a ballot will be conducted during the two weeks after the call for nominations has closed.

Remember

- Consider standing for election to school council this year.
- Ask at the school for help if you would like to stand for election and are not sure what to do.
- Be sure to vote in the elections.

Contact the principal for further information.

Fact sheet No 3. Information for students seeking election to council

What is a school council and what does it do?

All government schools in Victoria have a school council. School councils are legal entities that are given powers to set the broad directions of a school in accordance with their constituting Orders and the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*. In doing this, a school council is able to directly influence the quality of education that the school provides for its students.

What are some of the duties of a school councillor?

The school council has particular functions in setting and monitoring the school's direction.

School councils have three main responsibilities:

- **Finance:** overseeing the development and expenditure of the school's annual budget and ensuring proper records are kept of the school's financial operation.
- **Strategic planning:** participating in the development and monitoring of the school strategic plan.
- **Policy development and review:** developing, reviewing and updating selected policies that reflect a school's values and support the school's broad direction outlined in its strategic plan.

Other key functions of school councils may include:

- raising funds for school related purposes
- maintaining school grounds and facilities
- entering into contracts
- reporting annually to the school community and the Department
- creating interest in the school in the wider community
- representing and taking the views of the community into account
- regulating and facilitating after-hours use of school premises and grounds
- operating a children's service at the school.

Why is Student membership so important?

Students have a unique perspective on learning, teaching and schools. Having student members on school council allows students to have a say in the future direction of their school and ensures student input into decision making.

Student representation on secondary school councils will assist in the development of students' skills, including leadership skills and communication skills.

Do I need special experience to be on school council?

Each member brings their own valuable skills and knowledge to the role however, councillors may need to develop skills and acquire knowledge in areas that are unfamiliar to them in order to perform their duties as a councillor.

Student members are encouraged to acquire this knowledge by attending the Department's free face-to-face Improving School Governance school council training to support them to undertake their role. Training is also available online.

Who is on the school council?

For all schools with a student cohort of year 7 and above, there are four possible categories of school council membership:

- **A mandated elected Parent category** – more than one-third of the total members must be from this category. Parents and guardians of children attending the school are eligible for membership in this category.
- **A mandated elected DET employee category** – members of this category may make up no more than one-third of the total membership of school council. The principal of the school is automatically a member of this category.
- **A mandated elected Student category (2 positions)** – members of this category are enrolled at the school and in year 7 or above.
- **An optional Community member category** – members are co-opted by a decision of the council because of their special skills, interests or expertise. DET employees are not eligible to be a Community member.

How many Student member positions are there on school council?

All Victorian government schools with a student cohort of year 7 and above will have **two** mandated Student member positions on school council.

Can I share the role with another student?

Councillors are not permitted to share their role. Councillors are elected to council and are expected to attend all meetings and serve their full term of office.

Are school captains and SRC representatives offered a position on council before other students?

While being the school captain, vice-captain or a member of the SRC can provide valuable leadership experience, no students can be offered a position in the Student member category based on their standing within the school.

School captains and SRC members are not automatic council members. Voting for student leaders at the school, such as school captains and SRC representatives is a distinct and separate process to voting for Student school council members.

Any student interested in being a Student member of their school council is required to run for election like other council members.

How long is the term of office?

Generally, the term of office for all members is two years. The term of office of half the members expires each year, creating vacancies for the annual school council elections.

In 2018 only, one student was elected for a one year term of office and one student was elected for a two year term of office. From 2019, students will be elected to council for a two year term of office.

Do I serve the one year or two year term of office?

Where the members in the Student member category have been elected by ballot to their positions, the member in Student member category with the greater number of votes shall serve the longer term of office (two years), and the member with the second highest number of votes shall serve the shorter term of office (one year).

For the purpose of ranking the candidates, if there is a tie between some or all of the candidates standing for election the ranking of the candidates will be determined by the drawing of lots.

Where the members in the Student member category have not been elected by ballot to their positions (an equal number of students were nominated for the same number of Student member positions), the members in that member category may decide (by agreement amongst themselves) the term of office for each member in that membership category. Failing agreement, the term of office shall be determined by the drawing of lots.

The one and two year term of office positions allocated to the two Student members means, from 2019, it is likely that one student will be elected each year.

What do I need to do to stand for election?

The principal will issue a Notice of Election and Call for Nominations following the start of Term 1 each year.

If you decide to stand for election, you can arrange for a student in Year 7 or above at your school to nominate you as a candidate or you can nominate yourself (self-nomination) for the Student member category.

Once the nomination form is completed, it should be returned to the principal within the stated time. You will receive a Nomination Form Receipt following the receipt of the completed nomination.

Are there any rules on how I campaign?

Campaign literature supporting Student member candidates for school council elections may only be distributed and posted in certain places and times as designated by the principal of your school.

School resources may not be used to support candidates.

The principal may invite candidates to prepare a brief statement to be distributed with each ballot paper. The length is specified by the principal and is usually no longer than 150 words.

Nominations for school council

Unlike the Parent or DET employee member categories, if two Student member positions are available and in the first call for nominations only one nomination is received, the student is not automatically declared elected. The principal will immediately post, in a prominent place in the school, a notice calling for further nominations. These nominations are to be received within three school days from the closing of the first call for nominations.

If after the second call for nominations one other nomination is received, then both students are appointed to council.

After the second call for nominations if the total number of nominations exceeds the number of vacancies then all nominees will go to ballot. The two students with the most votes will serve as the Student members on school council.

How do I know which students are standing for election?

If the number of nominations exceeds the number of vacant positions, an election process will be held.

Student names will be listed in random order on the voting slip.

The principal may invite candidates to prepare a brief statement to be distributed with each ballot paper.

How do I vote?

At least seven days before the date fixed for the closure of the ballot, the principal will arrange delivery of the ballot papers.

A securely sealed ballot box or boxes in the case of multiple school campuses will be available for the casting of votes at the school between the hours of 8.00am and 4.00pm on every school day up to and including the day of the closure of the ballot.

A voter must not vote more than once in a ballot and may either post the vote back to the school or deliver the completed ballot paper to the school.

School council meetings

School councils must meet at least eight times a year and at least once per school term. The president chairs all meetings and all members of the council are expected to attend.

Councillors can attend meetings in person or by videoconferencing or teleconferencing.

Following the school council elections, council members will determine an appropriate time and location to hold meetings throughout the year. For example, council may agree that meetings will take place on the first Wednesday of each month in the school library.

For most school councils, meetings are located at the school and are held in the evening to ensure the majority of members can attend. Meetings typically last for around 2.5 hours.

You will need to discuss and arrange transport options to and from the meeting with your parent or guardian. The school council does not provide transport.

The principal (in consultation with the school council president) will ensure an agenda is prepared for each regular meeting and distribute the agenda, draft minutes from the previous meeting and meeting papers such as sub-committee reports, principal's and president's report to school council members no less than five days before the meeting. All members, including Student members are expected to read all documents and prepare in advance of each meeting.

Conflict of Interest

If you, as a member of council, or your immediate family has a direct conflict of interest (including a pecuniary* interest) in with a matter under discussion at a school council meeting, that member must declare the conflict of interest and must not be present during the discussion unless invited to do so by the person presiding at the meeting.

*For this purpose, pecuniary is defined as: relating to or consisting of money.

What if I cannot attend a council meeting?

If a member is unable to attend a meeting, an apology should be submitted to the principal prior to the meeting.

A member of the school council may apply in writing to the president for extended leave of up to three consecutive meetings.

Is there training that I can attend?

School councillors can attend face-to-face training offered statewide. The training uses the Improving School Governance package and is at no cost to school council members. Training is available in the following modules: Governance, Strategic Planning and Finance.

Students are encouraged to attend face-to-face training offered by the Department, in consultation with the principal. The principal is responsible for providing evidence of parent/guardian permission to the training providers should the student participate in training.

The modules are also accessible as online training. Participants can complete the modules at their own pace, in any order and are able to return to each module as many times as necessary. To access the online training see: Improving School Governance on the [Department's website](http://www.schoolgovernance.vic.edu.au/)
<<http://www.schoolgovernance.vic.edu.au/>>

Can a school council tell a teacher what to do?

A school council cannot issue instructions to teachers regarding their professional duties, or to employees of the Department in respect of their duties at the school. That role is the responsibility of the principal. If a school council has developed a school policy on certain matters and that policy is consistent with Departmental policy the council can expect the school staff to cooperate in putting the policy into practice.

Is there further information available regarding the roles and responsibilities of school councils?

Further information on the roles and responsibilities of school councillors is available on the [Department's external website at the School Councils web page](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/community/Pages/schoolcouncils.aspx)
<<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/community/Pages/schoolcouncils.aspx>>

or in the [School Policy and Advisory Guide at School Councils](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/governance/pages/councils.aspx)
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For further information please contact your school principal.

