

P&C processes – concerns & questions

A number of concerns were raised at the previous p&c meeting about processes followed, which I have attempted to review and respond to systematically.

1) Description of agenda items should be clear and complete

Concern that this agenda item wasn't adequately described - 'gender roles and schooling'.

As much of the discussion of this agenda item focused on discussion of an idea for a 'gender neutral' uniform, the word 'uniform' should have been in the description of the item.

The concern is valid. While some people who had been having the discussion informally knew a gender neutral uniform was part of a broader discussion about gender and schooling, others didn't and were surprised by the discussion. Although there was no formal motion or vote in this case, members are entitled to have equal knowledge in advance of what is to be discussed at the P&C

Clearly, there was no deliberate attempt to mislead members. Part of the intent of the agenda item was to have a broader discussion about gender (including comments from a parent who had expertise in gender issues) which didn't focus purely on the uniform. It was not entirely foreseen the extent to which speakers would choose to focus on the idea of a gender neutral uniform.

It should also be noted that when this item was placed on the agenda the P&C had not foreseen that the uniform committee would make their formal presentation at the next meeting. The advice the P&C had received at the time this discussion occurred was that the uniform committee presentation would probably not occur until 2015.

The P&C has made progress this year in distributing the agenda and meeting papers in advance of the meeting. One member recently commented that it was the first time they had come to the meeting knowing the agenda in advance.

(It should be noted that the P&C has received some criticism this year for both not putting enough information out ahead of the meeting and also for putting out too much information. Eg earlier in the year, the school informed the P&C it had received parent feedback asking why an agenda item was being 'promoted' by emailing information about the item in advance of the meeting.)

On balance, though, feedback has indicated parents prefer more information, not less, regarding issues coming up at P&C meetings, in order that parents may be prepared for the discussion, which can be more focused (and shorter!) than if they do not have information in advance.

2) Tabling of documents – should documents only be tabled if they are circulated in advance of the meeting?

A question was raised about the tabling of an academic article at the meeting on 'ritualised girling'. The article was only received by the P&C on the afternoon of the meeting and not tabled in advance.

Again, the concern is valid. Again, this was a consequence of 'busy lives' and not a deliberate act to mislead, but in combination with the general description of the agenda item, it may have led some members to feel unprepared for the discussion.

Currently, although the Chair has requested that information be tabled in advance of the meeting wherever possible, it has often (usually?) been the case that documents have been tabled at the meeting without circulation in advance.

Therefore while there was nothing inconsistent or inappropriate about the way this document was tabled, it is acknowledged that it would have been ideal for the document to have been tabled in advance of the meeting.

Recommendations in response to (1) and (2): In preparation of the agenda for this meeting care has been taken providing brief descriptions of each agenda item, and associated documents have been distributed ahead of the meeting..

I would suggest that this more detailed level of description serve as a template for the preparation of future P&C agendas.

Where a motion is put and a vote is to be taken on an item, and the description of the issue to be voted on has not been clear or compete, or a relevant document was not distributed in advance of the vote, then in accordance with the principles of 'participatory decision making' being proposed this evening, the vote should be deferred until the next meeting, with a full and clear description of the item being voted on, and any associated documents, included in the meeting papers distributed ahead of the next meeting.

It should also be noted that it is open to members if they think it desirable to move that a more formal approach be taken to the tabling of documents, or that no document be tabled at a meeting unless it has been circulated x days in advance. Currently no such hard and fast rule applies.

3) The development/ distribution of a 'uniforming the uniform' proposal by a group of parents – questions over appropriateness

It should be stated clearly that in the development / distribution of this proposal, the group of parents sought and followed the advice of the Chair.

Therefore, in doing so, the group of parents can not be said to have acted inappropriately.

I will briefly outline the advice I gave as Chair and members can make their own decisions about whether they consider it appropriate.

Following the meeting at which the discussion about gender and uniform occurred, a parent who had participated in (but not initiated) the discussion, suggested to a small group of parents that if the school wanted a truly gender neutral uniform, that would involve removing options for both a dress and a 'skort'.

It was understood at the time (correctly or incorrectly) that the uniform review committee's preference involved removal of the 'official' dress and replacing it with a 'skort' option.

The parent who approached me and the small group wanted to suggest that the uniform committee go a step further than this by proposing an option which neither included a dress or a skort, and this idea was supported by the small group involved in the discussion. I was asked by the parent how this idea could be put forward.

I suggested the parents could put forward this idea by writing to the uniform committee. While I didn't 'know' specifically whether parents could write to the uniform committee or not, this seemed to be a sensible place to start for those who wanted to have something to say about uniforms. Any further advice or guidance on the process could be provided by the uniform committee.

Also I had been advised previously in person and via the newsletter that it was not appropriate to discuss the issue with members of the uniform committee in the park. Therefore I assumed that putting ideas formally in writing rather than discussing informally was the preferred option.

The group of parents also discussed the idea of distributing their proposal to the entire school community to offer the opportunity for other parents to put their name to it if they wished. I advised against this course, given that the newsletter had advised parents against 'forceful lobbying' which may make parents feel pressured.

I advised the group that sending their proposal to all parents, might make some parents feel pressured or lobbied. I advised that there was nothing stopping them collaborating or discussing ideas with parents in a way that didn't make parents feel pressured, so sending the proposal informally to some parents they feel would be open to the idea, and not feel pressured, was fine, but that it was not appropriate to send to the whole school.

Based on this advice, one parent sent an email out to some other parents asking if they would be interested in putting their name to the proposal. The email was sent in a personal capacity, not as formal correspondence from the P&C and did not refer to the P&C in any way (for transparency, the parent has requested that this email be tabled).

Clearly though and unintentionally, this course led some parents to feel, quite validly, 'excluded' from the discussion.

Some agreed to add their names, and others responded with opposing views to the proposal. The proposal was then sent to me with the names attached, and I forwarded it on to the uniform committee.

While I was aware there were some parents who expressed opposing views I had not received any request or permission from those parents to forward their views to the uniform committee. I regarded those views as privately expressed.

I also did not consider it relevant, *at that stage* in the process to ensure those opposing views were put forward. It was clear to me that the idea being proposed for a 'gender neutral' uniform was understood to be a minority view, and a view or idea that most parents had probably not discussed or considered. The uniform committee was simply being asked to consider the idea as part of the consultation process, and possibly to put the idea forward to the school community as an 'option' which they could hopefully discuss, put forward relevant views (for or against) and either accept or reject.

The aim of the correspondence to the uniform committee was simply to get the 'gender neutral' uniform option on the 'ballot paper' (if there was to be one); the aim was clearly not to have the proposal adopted without discussion or vote.

After the proposal was submitted to the uniform committee, an apparent response to the proposal was published in the school newsletter. I then submitted to the uniform committee further feedback from parents to that response. [All correspondence to the uniform committee is attached]

The P&C also received a request (7 days in advance) to table the proposal at the next P&C meeting. This request was accepted, and the proposal was published on the website. This was done consistently with the way the P&C has been treated other parent proposals or suggestions. Opposing views to the proposal were not explicitly solicited at that time.

In the normal course of events, once an idea or proposal is presented or tabled then the P&C would receive opposing / alternative views and a discussion or debate may occur – we hadn't reached that point. It is usually not considered the responsibility of the sponsor of an idea, to also bring forward opposing views to their idea.

However, once the school moved to bring forward the presentation of the uniform options, the concern became valid that not all views, including opposing ones, regarding the 'uniforming the uniform' proposal had not at that point had an opportunity to be heard.

In response to both the feelings of some parents that they had been excluded from the discussion and the feeling that not all views had equal opportunity to be heard, in consultation with the executive, taking into account the short timeframe in which a formal vote was occurring, the P&C established a web forum 'uniform talk' where parents could choose, if they wish, to participate in the discussion and express their view.

More than 20 parents to date have chosen to do so, expressing a diversity of views.

Recommendations:

It is clear that parents will experience difficulties discussing these types of ideas if some consider it inappropriate to include everyone and leave some people feeling pressured but it's also inappropriate to only discuss amongst a smaller group, leaving people feeling excluded.

One solution that the P&C may wish to consider would be to use the 'uniform talk' web discussion forum as a potential template or format for similar discussions in the future or to facilitate such discussions via a social media tool such as facebook, with appropriate safeguards, to provide opportunities for respectful, appropriate, inclusive discussions amongst the parent community. Such a forum allows those parents who wish to be included and participate in the discussion to do so, and those who don't, to ignore it.

It also remains open to member(s) to consider proposing or suggesting guidelines for parents outlining how to discuss or collaborate ideas with other parents appropriately, (and if, desired outlining inappropriate behaviour).

Uniform Review Process

As well as the issues discussed above, questions have arisen about the uniform review process. At a previous meeting it had been minuted that the P&C had been involved in establishing the uniform review process and setting up the uniform review committee.

I need to make a correction to the record. After further questions, I reviewed previous minutes which make clear that the establishment of the uniform review committee was a decision by the school, and the process has been determined by the school/ uniform review committee, with limited input from the P&C.

The P&C Federation Handbook and Department of Education uniform policy & guidelines however state a role for the P&C eg allowing "any member with strong views" on the uniform to raise those views at the meeting, and also state that consultation should be in line with participatory decision making principles.

While the hard work and dedication of the uniform committee is acknowledged and appreciated, the process has suffered in my view, and frustrations have arisen, from a lack of coordinated approach between the school and P&C.

As Chair, I have worked to ensure P&C members have been able to have their say and freely discuss ideas within the guidelines laid out, but the P&C has not had an opportunity to work within the formal process established by the school or be involved as an active participant.

Some P&C members have questioned why some decisions seem to have been made without consultation eg why the 'winter tunic' has been removed as an option and why the backpack has changed? (One parent has raised concerns that the 'new' backpack is less ergonomically designed and potentially more damaging than the old). And questioned why certain options or choices were made about fabrics, but not other options. One has raised

concerns about the health effects of one of the fabrics. It is not clear how these questions are raised or discussed within the formal process, or whether they can be.

As well as members having strong views on uniforms, it should be noted that the P&C runs the uniform shop and so has a stake in issues such as whether stock lines/ choices should be expanded, etc.

Recommendations:

I suggest that:

- * future consultation processes (including future consultation on the uniform) be designed and conducted with P&C involvement as an active participant and partner of the school in the consultation.
- * the consultation process once determined be documented and published in advance, setting out the process clearly, including the timelines, and the appropriate ways for parents to have input, make suggestions, or ask questions about the process.

I have attached some articles about parent / teacher partnerships which I think could be models for future consultation processes of this type.

Complaint regarding conduct at a P&C meeting

Last week the P&C received a formal complaint from a member about what the member felt were serious allegations of misconduct made or implied at the last P&C meeting. The member felt that parent(s) were vilified by the comments, but were not given an opportunity to adequately respond, as no names of parents or details of allegations were provided. On receiving the complaint, I requested clarification and further detail from the person who had made the allegations. The school then advised me that the matter be referred to the Director of Education for further advice and resolution, and the complainant is currently considering that advice.

I should make clear that I have not received any specific details of these allegations or suggestions of misconduct. I had not received any advance notice of these issues or concerns before they were raised at the meeting, and was not expecting them to be raised.

In considering the matter, as Chair, I believe I should have taken action at the meeting when the allegations were first raised to ensure they didn't 'hang in the air'. I should have requested clarification, referral to a formal complaints process, or request that the comments be withdrawn.

My own view is that a general P&C meeting is not the appropriate forum for such allegations or suggestions of misconduct to be raised whether by or about a parent, or by or about a member of school staff.

I believe that any such allegations should be made formally to the P&C Executive in the first instance, or if that is not possible, to the P&C Federation.

In my role as Chair, I apologise to the complainant for the distress she felt due this incident.

Traffic issues

The P&C has a number of actions pending on local traffic safety issues – one is the P&C's call for a pedestrian crossing in the vicinity of Queen and Holden St. Another is traffic safety issues around the trinity driveway on Victoria St.

If any member is able to assist by following these issues up either before the end of this year or early next year, please let me know.

Concerns regarding management changes to small schools

Neroli Butt has volunteered to draft a letter expressing concerns regarding the management changes planned for small schools, and is aiming to complete the draft before the end of the year.

Gonski reforms implemented

2015 will see the first tranche of additional funds flow to NSW public schools based on the 'Gonski' needs-based funding model.

Cf <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/gonski-funding-flows-to-most-need-of-nsw-schools-20141120-11qlbq.html>

The P&C was one of many that played a small role in supporting the 'Gonski' funding campaign. The campaign continues to ensure the government extends the funding arrangements beyond the 4 years the federal government has currently agreed to.

Farewell to the Principal

On finishing this report, I received the news that Stacey Furner had accepted a position at a newly opening public school in Concord West. I am discussing with the Executive how the P&C can best honour / thank Stacey for her exceptional service to the school over 13 years.

I would like to personally thank Stacey for her support of me in the role of Chair of the P&C.

All ideas welcome.