School Advisory Council Frequently Asked Questions

GENERAL QUESTIONS

WHAT IS A SAC?

SACs are peer elected, collaborative teams composed of family members (largest group), the school principal, teachers or other school based staff, students (for schools with grades 7 – 12), and community members. SACs champion the work for improved student achievement, effective teaching in the classroom, parent and community engagement in the educational process, and communication and support between home and school. SAC meetings must be held at least every other month, and SACs must have data-driven, strategic conversations that center on the three primary focus areas for SACs. Those three focus areas are: supporting academic achievement, improving school climate, and strengthening family engagement.

The philosophy behind School Advisory Councils is: when parents/family members are engaged in their student's school, academic achievement improves. SACs provide a structure for partnerships between the school and community to be built and then implemented in an intentional, action-oriented, and genuinely accountable manner. Principals, teachers, and school staff share information pertinent to students' academic success, and parents and community members provide critical feedback informed by their parental perspectives and unique expertise. With all voices and viewpoints at the table, the SACs are well-informed, site-specific, and innovative vehicles for academic transformation in all schools.

WERE SACS MANDATORY IN THE PAST?

No. SACs were only mandatory for schools that underwent transformation under the Promise Academy model (2010). SACs officially became mandatory for all District schools on June 16, 2016 with the passage of Policy 920 ("School Advisory Councils") by the School Reform Commission. This remains policy under the Board of Education.

Over the past several years, School Advisory Councils in Philadelphia have struggled to be effective agents of change in support of student achievement and school improvement. Unfortunately, most of the challenges that SACs have faced have been due to a lack of cohesive policies, procedures, and practices related to their operations. However, on June 16, 2016, the School District of Philadelphia adopted comprehensive Policy 920—"School Advisory Councils"—with the intent of significantly increasing the involvement of families and the community in the educational process and making SACs catalysts for change in our schools. The policy was designed to ensure the establishment of an active and engaged School Advisory Council in each District school for the purpose of accomplishing the following two important goals:

1) To encourage families to become actively engaged in the education of their children, and to represent parent voices and advance their role in the educational decision making process; and
2) To interact effectively with all constituencies—families, community members, students, and district staff for the benefit of improving the achievement of all Philadelphia's public school students.

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WHAT SUPPORTS DOES THE DISTRICT OFFER TO SACS?

The FACE Office, in conjunction with all other departments in the School District of Philadelphia, is committed to implementing thriving SACs in all District schools. The FACE Office has developed and continues to develop policies and procedures that support the effectiveness of SACs; create educational materials and resources to assist SACs in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities; and provide community-based trainings, workshops, and conferences to SACs (with sessions on recruitment, resource mapping, running meetings, and more). SAC professional development trainings will involve many District departments so that SACs can be informed about a wide range of issues that affect academic achievement, climate, and family engagement.

The School District's Office of Family and Community Engagement also supports active and engaged SACs by gathering SAC performance data and reporting summary information to the superintendent of schools and the SRC; advising on conflicts within SACs in regards to membership, election of SAC members, and adherence to the SAC Bylaws in a fair and transparent manner; and facilitating resolutions to disputes within the SAC which cannot be resolved internally.

SAC Membership

HOW MANY MEMBERS DO SACS HAVE?

The SAC must include parents/family members (the largest group), the school principal, school staff, students (in middle and high schools), and community members. Policy 920, which mandates the existence of SACs in all District schools, does not specify how many members must sit on a SAC. The FACE Office offers the following compositions as examples:

- For Elementary (K-5) schools: 1 principal; 2 staff members; 4 family members; and 1 community member.
- For Elementary (K-8) schools: 1 principal; 2 staff members; 5 family members; 2 students (from 6th, 7th, or 8th grade), and 1 community member.
- For Middle Schools (including all Middle School configurations: 5 – 8; 6 – 8; and 7 – 8): 1 principal; 2 staff members; 5 family members; 2 students; and 1 community member.
- For High Schools (9 – 12): 1 principal; 2 staff members; 5 family members; 2 students; and 1 community member.

Please note that even if all stakeholders are represented, family member representatives must be the largest group on the SAC.

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IF THE FACE OFFICE DOES NOT DECIDE THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS, WHO DOES?

Ultimately, membership composition decisions fall to the school principal, but the basic member criteria must be met. The FACE Office provides guidelines for membership composition, but this does not necessarily have to be adopted if the principal determines that a larger or smaller group would work better for the school.

The principal should decide what the composition of the SAC (i.e., total number of members, including a breakdown of the number of parents/family members, staff, students, and community members) will look like BEFORE opening the Application Process.

DOES THE SAC HAVE TO HAVE 51% PARENTS/FAMILY MEMBERS?

No. In previous years, the SAC did have to have 51% parents/family members. The FACE Office made the decision to change this starting in the 2016 – 2017 school year. Our decision to move away from having 51% parents/family members was informed by anecdotal evidence from the school level about the difficulty of recruiting parents/family members to join the SAC. We have also moved away from the 51% parent/family member model because this model creates a very unbalanced SAC for schools that choose to have a small SAC (for example: if a SAC only has a total of 8 members, 5 members would have to be parents/family members and 1 member would have to be the principal, leaving only 2 seats open to staff members AND community members).

Parents/family members should still be regarded as an absolutely essential part of the SAC, and as such, parents/family members must represent the largest group on the SAC. In other words, if the SAC has a total of 8 members, 4 of those members must be parents/family members so that the group that represents parents/family members would have the largest number of SAC seats (2 would be staff members, 1 would be a community member, and 1 would be the principal).

WHO COUNTS AS A "FAMILY MEMBER"?

Parents/family members are identified as individuals whose children currently attend the school, or the primary caregiver(s) with whom the child resides (legal, custodial, grandparent, foster parent). The term "parent" includes, in addition to a natural parent, a legal guardian or other person standing in as a primary caregiver (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives).

With the exception of non-instructional paraprofessional staff members, school staff are not permitted to apply to the SAC as parent/family members.

DO I NEED TO BE THE LEGAL GUARDIAN OF THE STUDENT FOR WHOM I AM THE "PARENT/FAMILY MEMBER" ON THE SAC?

No. In an effort to be inclusive, the FACE Office has decided that any adult figure who acts as one of the primary caregivers of the student (including, but not limited to: biological mother; biological father; step-mother; step-father; aunt; uncle; grandmother; grandfather; cousin; sister; brother; neighbor; foster parent) can serve as a parent/family member on the SAC.

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DO ALL SAC MEMBERS NEED TO ATTEND EVERY SAC MEETING?

As the representatives of their respective community groups, SAC members should strive to attend every SAC meeting. If SAC members miss more than 40% of meetings, they will be eligible for membership termination.

Moreover, SACs are discouraged from making formal decisions (i.e., cannot vote on any matters) if a quorum is not present at a meeting. A quorum is defined as 51% of the members being present.

WHAT HAPPENS IF A SAC MEMBER DOES NOT ATTEND MEETINGS?

If a SAC member misses more than 40% of meetings, the member will be eligible for termination of membership. Any concerns with attendance will be addressed by the SAC Secretary. The SAC Secretary can issue an official warning of Breach of Membership.

If membership breaches persist after the warning is given, the SAC member in question will then attend a hearing at the next SAC meeting (only SAC members may be present for this hearing; all visitors will be asked to leave when all other business not related to the Breach of Membership Hearing is finished). At the hearing, the member in question will present their case, or an explanation for the Breach of Membership. The member in question will then be asked to leave. The remaining SAC members will discuss the member in question's case and must come to a unanimous decision on whether or not the membership will be terminated.

If the SAC decides to terminate the member's SAC membership, the SAC Secretary must immediately notify the Office of Family and Community Engagement of the change in membership by contacting sac@philasd.org.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A "SAC MEMBER" AND "SAC MEETING ATTENDEE"?

A SAC member is someone who submitted a SAC Application during the school's SAC Application Process and then either became a SAC member or was elected to the SAC (if there were more SAC applications than seats available on the SAC). SAC members have voting privileges during meetings, and they are also responsible for carrying out the work of the SAC as outlined in the SAC Constitution and decided in the school's SAC Bylaws.

A SAC meeting attendee is someone who attends and participates in SAC meetings but is not a member of the SAC. In other words, a SAC meeting attendee did not submit a SAC Application, or, if they did submit an application, they were not elected to be a SAC member. SAC meetings are required to be open to the public and SACs must listen to public concerns/commentary, so SAC meeting attendees can attend and participate at all SAC meetings. However, SAC meeting attendees do not have the right to vote at SAC meetings.

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Roles & Responsibilities of the SAC

WHAT RESPONSIBILITIES DO THE SAC MEMBERS HAVE?

Each school's SAC is unique in its composition and the way it functions. Policy 920 and the SAC Constitution lay out some responsibilities of SAC Members. Generally, they have the following responsibilities:

1. Meet monthly or at least every other month.
2. Review the school budget and provide input on discretionary spending.
3. Review school-based policies. For example, policies governing school culture and climate, school safety, discipline, truancy, extracurricular activities, family member engagement, and student supports.
4. Play a major role in strengthening effective school-community relations, improving communication between school and home, encouraging community input, and sharing information on advisory work and decisions with larger school community.
5. Play an active role in supporting, promoting, and recommending school based programs and initiatives.
6. Examine data on the effectiveness of school-based programs and services and periodically inform Action Plan strategies and recommendations to ensure continued progress toward school goals.

CAN SACS FUNDRAISE?

Generally, no. SACs cannot fundraise in the way that HSAs or Friends Of groups can. If a SAC chooses to fundraise, it must be done through the school's student activity fund because SACs are overseen by the School District of Philadelphia and as such, any funds raised must be funneled through the District.

SACs do have the option of soliciting businesses for in-kind donations, such as food or other items that the SAC may want or need for meetings or an event. In-kind donations are defined as "goods and services" that are not in the form of cash.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL ON THE SAC?

The principal will always be an automatic member of the SAC. The principal is the educational leader at the school, and as such, they are a key person in creating the environment necessary to bring about positive change. The principal is responsible on the SAC for sharing with parents/family members, school staff, students, and community members the information necessary (data, documents, policies, etc.) to assist and inform the work of the SAC. Along with all other SAC members, the principal should harness the power of the SAC to create an environment where teaching and learning are enhanced, students feel safe, and families feel welcome.

The SAC Constitution speak to some of the duties of the principal:

1. Coordinate the Application Process and timeline for all SAC seats SAC and, if need be, the Election Process.

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2. Ensure that elections for family and community members are conducted in accordance with the SAC Bylaws and/or other school guidelines with fairness and fidelity. The principal will utilize the assistance of the SAC Support Team from the Office of Family and Community Engagement with the SAC Application and Election process.
3. Develop a process whereby students elect student representatives to the SAC each year.
4. Develop a process whereby the school staff will elect staff representatives to the SAC each year.
5. Distribute election results directly to the school community through postings in the school, on the school website, social media, and any other forum at the school's disposal.
6. Address any concerns raised by members of the SAC throughout the year.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PARENTS/FAMILY MEMBERS ON THE SAC?

Parents/family members are as central to the SAC as the principal and school staff. The School District of Philadelphia believes that families are integral to the success of our students and schools.

Parents/family members provide critical feedback informed by their parental perspectives and unique expertise. The role of parents/family members on the SAC is to review, provide feedback and input on, and inform the revision/creation of new school policies and programs. With all voices and viewpoints at the table, the SACs are well-informed, site-specific, and innovative vehicles for academic transformation in all schools.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF ON THE SAC?

The most important interaction affecting student performance takes place daily between the school staff and students. For this reason, school staff are an integral part of the SAC and in informing decisions about curriculum, classroom operations, classroom resources, and school climate.

Teachers and other school staff will contribute practical knowledge about curriculum and instructional strategies, school operations and support services, as well as the school's history and culture.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STUDENTS ON THE SAC?

Students will bring a different kind of practical experience to the SAC since they are direct recipients of school services. They will offer a range of opinions often distinct from adult perspectives.

Schools with grades 7 - 12 must have student representatives on their SACs. Elementary School (Kindergarten through grade 6) SACs are not required to include student members.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS ON THE SAC?

Community member representation on the SAC provides a valuable bridge between the school and the surrounding community. The role of community members on the SAC is to review, provide feedback and input on, and inform the revision/creation of new school policies and programs, using their unique perspectives as people outside of the school and/or their professional expertise.

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Community members are identified as individuals who have an interest in the school's welfare, namely individuals residing in the school's geographic area (catchment area), individuals owning, operating, or working in a business or organization within the school's community (catchment area), and/or alumni of the school.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF OTHER PARENT GROUPS IN THE SCHOOL?

Whatever arrangement the school community makes for other school bodies, it is essential for everyone to understand the roles and responsibilities of the distinct groups. For example, the Home and School Association may continue as a separate group representing the voices and views of parents only; the Friends Of group may continue to function as a separate group external to the school that brings community members together to assist the school in projects or other needs. The SAC should always be seen as the group that focuses on making decisions about policies and programs to support student achievement, improve school climate, and strengthen family engagement at the school.

According to the preferences of the school community, these other groups may continue to function separately from the SAC and send a representative to SAC meetings to learn about the activities of the SAC and share their own group's activities. Alternatively, HSAs and Friends Of groups, etc. may choose to merge with the SAC. These important decisions should be made at the school level; the FACE Office does not intend to make a blanket statement or policy regarding how SACs, HSAs, Friends Of groups, etc. should interact and coexist because this decision will vary based on the school. The SAC Support Team is available to provide mediation if the various family groups at the school cannot work together.

SACs vs. Home & School Associations

HOW IS A SAC DIFFERENT FROM A HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATION (HSA)?

The FACE Office distinguishes between SACs and HSAs based on the criteria necessary to be considered a SAC, which include 1) ongoing meetings, 2) the correct council composition, and 3) strategic conversations.

Beyond these formal criteria, there are a few fundamental differences between SACs and HSAs:

First, SACs must include all stakeholders: the school principal, parents/family members, school staff, community members, and students (for middle and high schools only). HSAs are often parent-only groups; staff members can attend HSA meetings, but only parents can become HSA members and vote at meetings. Also, all HSA members must pay dues to the Home and School Council. In contrast, SAC membership must include not only parents/family members, but the school principal, school staff, community members, and students (for middle and high schools).

Second, SAC meetings must be focused around strategic conversations. Strategic conversations require examining school data and brainstorming solutions to issues affecting student achievement and school improvement. While HSAs have historically been fundraising and event planning bodies, SACs are meant to be more policy-focused and issue-oriented.

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Third, SACs cannot fundraise in the way that HSAs can. If a SAC chooses to fundraise, it must be done through the school's student activity fund because SACs are overseen by the School District of Philadelphia. HSAs are not overseen by the School District of Philadelphia; the Home and School Council (which is the governing body of all HSAs in the city) has an office space in the School District of Philadelphia central office (440 N. Broad), but the District itself does not manage HSAs. The Home and School Council is a registered non-profit organization and as such it can fundraise.

CAN MEMBERS OF THE HSA BE INVOLVED IN THE SAC?

Yes, and this is encouraged! A Home and School Association member can attend SAC meetings and/or apply for SAC membership, and a SAC member can become a member of the HSA if they are a parent of a child enrolled at the school. Membership cross-over between the two groups allows for the sharing of ideas and updates about the school and school improvement efforts.

WE HAVE A HIGH FUNCTIONING HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATION/PARENT GROUP. CAN THIS COUNT AS OUR SAC?

Yes, as long as you meet the FACE Office's SAC Criteria. The FACE Office does not require that the group call themselves a "School Advisory Council" if they have previously gone by another name and want to keep that identity. As long as the group meets the FACE Office's SAC Criteria of having 1) ongoing meetings, 2) the correct council composition, and 3) strategic conversations and submits the correct documentation to prove that these criteria are being fulfilled, the school will be counted as having a "SAC" even if the group self-identifies as a Home and School Association (or other parent/community group).

SACs Data Collection

HOW WILL THE FACE OFFICE COLLECT DATA ON SACS?

The FACE Office will conduct throughout the school year to ensure that schools are building and maintaining active and engaging SACs.

During each of these checkpoints, the FACE Office will determine the existence of a SAC based on the submission of the correct SAC documentation by the school in cooperation with a Family Engagement Liaison, Family Engagement Coordinator, or School Improvement Support Liaison. The necessary documentation includes a member roster reflecting the correct council composition, a meeting calendar for the entire school year, sign in sheets from SAC meetings, and meeting agendas.

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WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR NOT HAVING A FUNCTIONING SAC?

The 2016 – 2017 school year was the first year that SACs were mandated by the School District of Philadelphia and as such, accountability measures were put into place to ensure that SACs are actually implemented at the school level.

Principals will be partially evaluated on the existence of a SAC at their school. Each school principal's Pennsylvania Department of Education Framework for Leadership Effectiveness Evaluation will include sections on SAC engagement. If a school does not have a functioning SAC, the principal will face repercussions on their evaluation form.

Moreover, the Office of Family and Community Engagement sends a report to the superintendent of schools and the Board of Education at the end of the school year detailing which schools have a SAC and each SAC's level of implementation. While the FACE Office offers support to all SACs, additional resources will be focused on schools with no SAC.

Application & Election Process

HOW DO I BECOME A MEMBER OF THE SAC?

All interested people should fill out a SAC Application Form online at www.philasd.org/sac. The Office of Family and Community Engagement no longer accepts paper applications.

When an applicant submits an application, a copy of their application will be sent to the applicant, the school principal, and the FACE Office.

WHEN SHOULD THE APPLICATION PROCESS OPEN AND CLOSE?

Every school is different; the school's SAC Bylaws will determine when the Application Process should occur. Some schools may choose to have the Application Process take place in the spring, so that by the end of the year the SAC is in place for the next school year. Schools that are just building a new SAC may choose to hold the Application Process in the fall so that the SAC can begin meeting by the winter.

ARE ELECTIONS REQUIRED?

Elections are only required if a school receives more applications than seats available on the SAC. In other words, if there are 4 seats reserved for parent/family members on the SAC and only 4 parents/family members submit a SAC Application, you do not need to hold an election. However, if you have 4 seats reserved for parent/family members and you receive 10 applications, you may need an election.

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WHAT IF WE RECEIVE JUST ONE MORE APPLICATION THAN SEATS AVAILABLE ON THE SAC? DO WE NEED TO HOLD AN ELECTION?

You can absolutely choose to hold an election in this case, but in the case of there being a few applicants more than seats allotted, you may choose to alter the SAC composition. For instance, if you have 4 seats reserved for parents/family members and you receive 6 applications, you may choose to simply alter the SAC composition so that there are 6 seats for parents/family members.

The only requirement for SAC composition is that parents/family members must represent the largest group on the SAC, so as long as this remains the case, you can slightly alter the SAC composition after receiving SAC Applications.

WHAT IF WE DO NOT RECEIVE ENOUGH APPLICATIONS TO FILL SEATS ON THE SAC?

If after recruiting members and doing community outreach you do not receive enough applications, you should go ahead and call your first SAC meeting. The top priority of the first SAC meeting should be how to recruit new members and encourage others to get involved.

For instance, if you have 4 seats reserved for parents/family members on the SAC but you only receive 2 applications from parents/family members, you should go ahead and meet. Everyone on the SAC should focus their efforts on filling the remaining two seats for parents/family members.

HOW DO WE HOLD AN ELECTION?

The school principal should contact the FACE Office to arrange for a FACE Staff representative to assist in the Election Process to ensure it is fair and democratic. Information from the school's SAC Applications will be used to create SAC Election Ballots.

The SAC Election Ballot should be sent home with all students so that all parents/guardians have an opportunity to vote on who they think should represent parents/family members on the SAC. The SAC Election Ballot can be sent home on a paper sheet or distributed through email. The FACE Office recommends that schools allow 5 full school days for parents/guardians to return their ballots. The close date of the election must also be well-publicized so that parents/guardians are aware of when they need to submit their ballots. Once the Election Process has closed, a FACE Staff representative will attend the vote counting process to ensure that votes are counted accurately and provide technical assistance as needed.

HOW ARE COMMUNITY MEMBERS ELECTED TO THE SAC?

Community Members will only need to be elected if the school receives more applications than seats available on the SAC for community members.

In the case that the school receives more applications than seats available on the SAC for community members, the community members' applicant information should be added to the SAC Election Ballot for parent/family members. The SAC Election Ballot (with information on both parent/family candidates and community candidates) should be sent home with all students.

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ARE ELECTIONS "SCHOOL-WIDE" FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS AS WELL?

No. Staff should be elected by staff and students should be elected by students. Staff members should take a vote at the upcoming staff meeting or through an online platform (such as Google Forms) in order to determine who the SAC's staff representatives will be.

If a student government exists, that group should organize an election for student representatives to the SAC. If a student government does not exist, the principal or a designee should organize an election to determine which students will sit on the SAC.

WHAT DO WE DO IN THE CASE OF A CONTESTED ELECTION?

A FACE Staff representative should be present during vote counting to ensure that ballot results are collected in a democratic manner, but if a SAC applicant still feels that the Election Process was unfair or biased, they should contact sac@philasd.org. A representative from the SAC Support Team will then facilitate an investigation and determine next steps for the SAC or if a new election should be conducted.

Operations of the SAC

HOW OFTEN SHOULD SACS MEET?

SACs should aim to meet every other month, but the FACE Office recommends that they meet every month. SACs must meet at least four times throughout the school year to meet the ongoing meetings criteria, per Policy 920.

ARE MEETINGS CLOSED OR OPEN TO THE PUBLIC?

The SAC is required to open its meetings to the public. In addition, the SAC must allow the public to address the SAC on any matter within its scope. The SAC must also make any meeting materials available to the public upon request.

Because SAC meetings are open to the public, meeting notices must be posted at least three days in advance specifying the date, time, and location of the SAC meeting.

ARE WE REQUIRED TO TAKE MEETING MINUTES?

No, meeting minutes are not required. However, the FACE Office does encourage the SAC Secretary (or other designee) to take minutes during meetings, and materials at www.philasd.org/sac have tips on how to format and take meeting minutes.

Moreover, if the SAC decides to take meeting minutes, those minutes should be made public so that anyone can stay up to date on the activities of the SAC. Meeting minutes can be posted on the school's website or included in the school's newsletter (if those communication mechanisms exist), or they can be posted on a bulletin board in the main office or sent home with students.

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IS THERE A SAC CHAIRPERSON?

Starting in the 2016 – 2017 school year, the FACE Office decided to move away from the model of having a SAC Chair, Vice Chair, and Secretary. We felt that this model encouraged hierarchy rather than collaboration, so we replaced these roles with a "SAC Leadership Team" made up of a SAC Facilitator, SAC Organizer, and SAC Secretary.

DO SAC LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBERS HAVE TO BE PARENTS?

No. The SAC Leadership Team (i.e., the SAC Facilitator, SAC Organizer, and SAC Secretary) should be elected by SAC members at the first SAC meeting. The school principal should go over the roles and responsibilities of each leadership role and then ask for nominees, after which all SAC members should choose/elect the member to fill each leadership role.
Anyone who is a member of the SAC can fill one of the Leadership Team roles. This is not restricted to parents/family members.

Scope of SAC Authority

HOW MUCH POWER DO SACS HAVE TO MAKE DECISIONS?

School Advisory Councils are advisory bodies, meaning that they have the power to look at, review, provide input on, and inform revisions/the creation of school programs, plans, and policies, such as the school budget and the comprehensive school plan.

SACs are all about collaboration and consensus decision-making. While the powers of the SAC remain "advisory," the views of all SAC members are to be taken seriously by the school administration and as such, all views should be taken into consideration before the school moves forward with creating new programs, plans, or policies.

WHO HAS THE ULTIMATE DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY?

As the leader of the school, the school principal has the ultimate decision-making authority. However, the purpose of the SAC is to bring together diverse perspectives and expertise so that all stakeholders in the school community can collaborate to make the school better. As such, the school principal is expected to take seriously the perspectives and input of other SAC members.

SACs are not information-sharing sessions where the principal simply reads school policies and updates to parents; the SAC is intended to be a real decision-making body where all members have a voice, discussions are robust, and all views are heard before a decision is made. While the school principal has the ultimate decision-making power, they are expected to listen and to take into account the input of the SAC members before making their final decision.

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