

CONSENSUS PROCESS AT HCCPS

Consensus is a decision-making process, which emphasizes cooperation and respect among all those involved. Its focus is on making the best and most informed decision possible by considering and blending all available points of view in order to reach an acceptable level of unanimous agreement. Majority vote, though a more popular and expedient approach, presents a competitive model in which making the best possible decision for all concerned becomes less important than “winning.” While consensus can be a more complicated and time-consuming process, it generally leads to better, more satisfying outcomes.

What today we call “consensus” is very likely the oldest form of decision-making to be found anywhere, since it is essentially the method used by tribal peoples among the world’s most ancient cultures. Specifically, our modern consensus process is derived from the tribal council structure of the Iroquois Confederacy whose principles influenced the likes of Jefferson and Franklin. It also appears to have influenced the early Quakers, who developed the basic method we use today.

The consensus process of the Board of Trustees:

Designate three people whose job is to support the discussion:

- **Meeting Facilitator** to oversee the process. S/he is empowered to interrupt, re-direct or set time limits to keep the discussion focused.
- **List-keeper** notes all who wish to speak; records of their names in the order of request. S/he may announce the names on the list periodically.
- **Time-keeper** watches the clock and tells participants when they are approaching a time limit.

1. Presentation of proposal

Facilitator asks the designated person to present the proposal.

Proposals should be given in writing to meeting participants in advance of the meeting.

The report should include the key elements in the discussions leading up to the proposal, e.g.:

- Why would this be a good or necessary thing to do?
- How is the proposal in keeping with the aims of the school?
- What concerns or objections, if any, do committee members have about the proposal?
- What other factors (time, money, etc.) have a bearing on the proposal?

2. Clarifying questions

Facilitator opens a round of clarifying questions.

Debate and discussion are not allowed at this time.

Questions should be as specific and concise as possible.

3. Discussion of proposal

Facilitator opens a round of discussion.

Facilitator may allow clarifying questions or responses out of order on the list.

If no one asks to speak, facilitator may check to see if consensus already exists.

4. Finger poll

Facilitator may ask for a finger poll at any point, and especially between rounds of discussion

The goal is to see how close you are to consensus, and to identify those with concerns.

If there are substantial or blocking concerns:

5. Further discussion, questioning, and compromise

Facilitator asks to have concerns restated

Facilitator opens another round of discussion specifically focused on the objections. [The goal

is to craft a compromise addressing the concerns sufficiently so that the blocks can be withdrawn.]

6. Standing aside.

A trustee with substantial objections may elect (or be asked) to step aside.

This may occur at any point in the discussion.

7. Blocking

- A participant may block a proposal:
- A block must be “principled”; that is, it must relate to the mission, by-laws, and culture of the school, not be based on personal values or preferences.
- Blockers must be willing to compromise actively, honestly and substantially
- The facilitator may call a break or adjourn the meeting to another date to defuse a volatile situation.

Questions to ask a blocker:

- What do you fear will happen if the proposal is approved?
- Are there parts of the proposal that you can accept?
- How does your block of this proposal serve the best interests of the school?
- Is your block based on your personal values or preferences? If so, is it fair to try to impose those on everyone else?
- How does your block of the proposal relate to the aims, values and culture of the school?
- How is this situation different from (name a similar situation, in which someone set aside their block)?
- Would you be willing to accept the proposal on a trial basis, to be evaluated by such-and-such a date?

8. Overriding a block

- If all other members unanimously agree that the block is not "principled", and/or the blocker is not actively working towards compromise, they can override the block on the grounds that the blocker has stepped outside of the agreed-upon consensus process.
- Simple majority vote: HCCPS by-laws stipulate that if the BOT cannot reach consensus, the trustees may decide the outcome by simple majority vote. This is to be avoided, since it points to a failure of our chosen process. It should only be used if the process is failing AND there is compelling reason to make a decision at this meeting.

9. Reaching consensus

Facilitator asks if there are any further objections to the proposal. If none, the facilitator will state that "consensus has been achieved", or "the proposal will be considered approved."

POINTERS:

Be clear and concise; avoid repeating yourself or restating what someone else has already said, Use non-verbal shows of agreement such as “twinkling” (raising the fingers and wiggling them)

Standing aside means that a person still harbors strong objections to a proposal, but is willing to allow it to pass.

Finger Poll: Each member raises from one to four fingers to indicate their level of agreement: four fingers show that the trustee fully supports the proposal as it stands; three fingers indicate support with minor reservations; two fingers stand for reluctant agreement with substantial reservations which would encourage further discussion and modification of the proposal; and one finger signifies that the trustee disagrees strongly enough with the proposal as to block agreement.

Some basic principles of consensus:

- a. Cooperation** - participants must be willing to work harmoniously with each other
- b. Respect** - participants must honor each other's intrinsic value and inclusion in the process
- c. Flexibility** -participants must be willing to compromise, to bend their ideas to accommodate others'.
- d. Creativity** --- participants must strive to find creative and innovative solutions in order to achieve acceptable compromises; thinking "outside the box" is encouraged.