

Hosting a Regional Conference



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NOTE: Throughout this handbook, the term “year” is used quite often. This refers to the school year, NOT the calendar year.

I. The **VERY** Beginning

This section could also be labeled “How much do you want it?” Or, another could be “Are you biting off more than you can chew?” It is not unusual for only one or two select students, maybe the officers in your council, to have the desire to host a conference. But, it takes A LOT more than one or two students, even with the help of their advisor. If less than 75% of your council isn’t enthusiastic about the possibility of hosting, it might be near impossible to put on a successful conference.

It is very important for any council considering hosting a regional (or even state) conference to gauge that level of desire. But also, it is imperative to match that desire with the ability to follow through with the work involved. This is not meant in any way to scare anybody off this wonderful opportunity. But, honesty with yourself will save a lot of chaos and stress later. Let’s face it. We all know people who can accurately be described as “All talk, and no action.” It very reasonable that any council might have a few such members. However, a conference can’t be successful without an adequate force to plan it and work it.

In addition to the desire, does the council have the maturity to handle the undertaking? That is not meant to sound condescending or even harsh. But, there will come times when people will need to be “called on the carpet” for not doing their jobs or doing them poorly. Can your students handle being verbally reprimanded? Can they handle the success? It isn’t exactly rare for one or two students to want to “hog the spotlight.” Both problems can and do pop up when hosting conferences. Addressing the probability early on can alleviate some of the difficulty and hard feelings later.

Once you can reasonably be sure that your council’s heart is in it 100%, it is time to look at your school board and the administration. Ask any conference host, and you will get stories, both good and bad, concerning decisions made by principals and superintendents that directly

impacted their conference. Some come from the board of directors. Such decisions can be anything from the school calendar, the staff, or the meals.

So, after a little introspection, both on both the school and council levels, if you're satisfied your council is ready for this amazing opportunity, you now need to prepare to win the conference for your school!

II. Bidding for the Opportunity

Essentially, the bid proposal is a presentation proving that your council AND school is able to hold the regional conference. Not only that, you are trying to show that you are more prepared than any rival. What does that mean? The criteria used to judge a school's ability to host can be divided among a few categories.

Facilities:

- Typically, the attendance can range from 700 to 1200 combined students and advisors. So, your school needs the capacity to handle that many people. Here is a list to consider:
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Lunches

- how many people can be served in your cafeteria at a time? Do you need 2 or 3 rotations?

General Session(s)

- often an auditorium or gym
- Adequate sound? Echoes off wall?
- What about lighting? Maybe a stage if in the gym
- Video? Projection screens for speakers or similar?

Workshop Rooms

- Typically 30 to 50 workshops.
- A good goal might be 20 delegates per workshop (25 max.)

Caucus Rooms

- One for every county
- Can be done in a rotation - would mean fewer rooms, but used 2 or 3 times.

Parking

- Expect 40 to 50 schools
- 10 to 25 busses, plus vans

Other

- Restrooms
- Hallways
- Registration area(s)
- Snack areas (optional)

Logistics

In plain English, that means can you get the right amount of the right thing at the right place at the right time. For example, if your wi-fi network can only handle 500 devices at a time, your school is going to have a problem with 1000 people showing up with an average of one or two smartphones / tablets each.

Issues that might fall into this category are:

School's calendar

- Will it be a staff in-service day?
- Will it be a typical day off for other schools? Usually causes low attendance.
- Is school undergoing renovations?

State testing schedule

- Avoid Keystones and PSSA's

Technology (network capacity)

- Accessibility is crucial for many workshop presenters
- Regular delegates and advisors like to "stay connected" to email, Twitter, etc.
- Beware of problems with logging in or dropped connections

Travel from room to room.

- If general session is far from the workshop rooms or similar, foot traffic can cause havoc to the schedule as people show up to everything late.
- Can kids "get lost" trying to find their workshops? How can this be minimized or hopefully eliminated?
- Maps? Signs?
- Staff at hallway intersections?

Faculty

- How many do you have?
- Will faculty be there to there to help? (directions, workshop attendance, etc.)
- Status of contract? A student council conference walking through a picket line of striking teachers is NOT ideal.

Finances

- While the conference needs to be financially independent from both your council and your school, it will still be loosely attached.
- Do you have an adequate system of bookkeeping and ordering supplies? Can you get enough donations to keep the cost at a minimum?

Associated costs that should be covered are:

- Food
- Take Aways (T-shirts, bags, goodies in the bags, etc.)
- Decorations
- Speaker(s)
- Rentals (games, inflatables, etc.)
- Any services that your school may not cover (for example: mailings and postage)
- Security (may not be “needed” ...PASC is not known for that kind of rowdy behavior, but some schools still require it)

General Things to Consider and Plan for Proposal

Not all influences on your presentation refer to a specific connection to the school's physical ability to host a conference. Instead, there are some details about the conference itself.

Theme

Schedule

Program / App

How is the conference information going to be disseminated?

Administrative support

School “buy-in” by other clubs and students

Decoration ability? Students & staff volunteers to get the job done?

Set up and clean up workforce?

***A rubric exists as a guideline, both for schools preparing a bid and the regional board in evaluating the presentations. However, this rubric is not a true scoring measure, leaving room for some artistic flavor and personalization. You can find the rubric at the end of this handbook.

III. Before the Conference

You've won the bid! It will likely be early February or late January when you are selected as the host school for the conference the following year. Depending on your conference date, you might only have a little over 12 to 14 months.

Between the bid and the conference, in addition to working hard on the planning and preparation, you will attend FOUR Region F Board meetings to provide updates. Generally speaking, these updates are fairly similar to the bid presentation, but do not have its stress, and gradually become more detailed with each meeting. The board meets every year in the fall, winter, and spring. As the host school, your first meeting would be in the spring after you won the bid and the last would be the spring AFTER your conference.

In fact, the first requirements actually occur BEFORE that first spring meeting, and must be completed to be shown at the current year's conference. These items exist essentially to begin advertising YOUR conference.

Conference before Yours

Website - a skeleton version of your conference website should be up and functional (Everything in this list). Please keep the same pattern of RegionF20xx.weebly.com where xx is the year of the conference.

Theme - This wasn't a must-have for the presentation, but it is now.

Date - Same here! Verify this with your own school's administration.

Logo - Something eye catching for all to see & remember. *makes a good shirt = nice bonus!*

Video - This video is the first look people will get of your conference! Bait the hook and reel them in!

Board Meeting Updates

As mentioned, the conference updates will become more detailed, but also focus on certain topics at specific meetings. Your plans concerning some of the focus topics might not be "carved in stone" as the saying goes. Often, it may be a case of, "We were considering THIS, but are looking for opinions..." After hearing much input, the ultimate decision is yours. Sometimes the board changes your mind; sometimes you change theirs.

As many of these decisions are finalized, the website needs to be updated to reflect them.

Spring board meeting before your host year:

Speaker - the name of the speaker(s), why they were chosen, and anything significant about them

Budget - still a little rough, but there should be significant changes with what might have been in your presentation as you got more info from various contacts (food, speaker, school, etc.) It is important that this is maintained closely throughout the planning process as it is a BIG part of the update at each board meeting. Remember, \$2 for each attendee (adult and student) goes back to Region F

Schedule - often this is not 100% decided on at this point, but usually narrowed down to no more than 3 options. (Hosts often like advice on this and similar items)

Caucuses - Are they part of lunch rotation? If not, where are they in the schedule? Enough rooms?

Lunches - You don't need to have the menu worked out yet, but if you do...great! How many lunch periods? 2? 3? How are you rotating them?

Workshops - How many sessions? 2 or 3? Is one of the sessions a part of the lunch rotation? This is very tricky to balance with lunch for the presenters

Target Dates - When is the window for workshop applications? Registration?

Fall board meeting of your conference year

*This meeting will take place at your school.

Website - show any major changes - MUST be 100 % by date of State Conference

Budget - same thing

Registration - "unpublished" form should be ready to be tested

Workshops - how will applications be submitted?

Advertising - how are you getting the word out?

Schedule - Including lunches and caucuses, should be 95% finalized or better (always room for tweaking)

Dates - any changes? Probably not.

T-Shirts - If not addressed anywhere else... Who? How ordered? Cost?

Decorations - Preliminary discussion on ideas and such

Winter of your conference year - likely last meeting before the day of the conference

Budget - should be almost final draft - very few if any expense changes (there are always surprises)

Advertising - Final push to get people to come to the conference

Your teachers - What are they doing during the conference?

Troubleshooting - Expect the unexpected! Brainstorm FAQs

Lunches - envision lines. Will everyone be able to move around? Will they have enough time to eat? Will lines be labeled?

Technology - needed for general sessions, but also wifi for everyone. Good rule is many people will have 2 devices each (phone + tablet or laptop)

Winter board meeting prior to your conference

Be prepared to give a final update on your conference, with number of workshop submissions, registrations numbers, budget, changes since last meeting etc.

IV. During the Conference

Be ready for anything. It is crucial to have an easy-access area designated as Troubleshooting and Lost & Found. Remember, the goal is NOT to make yourself look good, but to provide a great experience. Delegates and advisors should have useful ideas, activities, or simple sage advice to take back to apply to their schools, and possibly even their own personal lives. If you accomplish THAT, you WILL look good because of a great conference.

To that end, strive to make the whole day as smooth as possible. That means:

- Don't let people get lost (signs, maps, guides, themed or color coded hallways, etc.)

- Keep good communication open between attendees and your council
- Keep good communication open WITHIN your council
- Problem solve like your life depended on it.
 - That may mean the emergency change of plans - gulp! But flexibility can be a lifesaver - IF YOU COMMUNICATE it to everyone who is impacted!
- Key areas that MUST run smooth during your conference:
- Registration - double and triple check everything here... names, name tags, t-shirts, goodie bags, etc. This is the first impression when a council arrives at your conference. Don't let them walk away with a bad view before you even get started. Organization is vital here, but several people who serve as specialized troubleshooters come in very handy here.
- Lunches - if people go away hungry, it is guaranteed to affect their view of the whole conference. Timeline confusion, rude servers, and jam-packed cafeterias have been common downers on evaluations over the years. Keep people nearby to help if needed and in whatever way is needed.

Evaluation:

Sometime within your conference, you must use the Region F Conference Evaluation. This evaluation form was created so the evaluation process is not skewed in any way and allows the board to gauge conferences over the years on even terms (looking for trends and such). How you implement that evaluation is in your hands. QR code? Link presented during the first general session? Maybe the second general session or delivered to the last workshops or even lunch. But this is a MUST. We can't fix what we don't know is wrong...or repeat what is successful if no one tells us. The results of this evaluation is presented in your final report to the board.

V. After the Conference

You may remember that earlier in this handbook it was mentioned that your council needed to provide updates for four Region F Board meetings. But, there were only 3 described in detail up to this point. The last report actually comes AFTER the conference.

Spring AFTER your conference

This is a more formal report in print or shared Google Doc.

- Budget - should be totally complete with ALL expenses and income.
 - Region F should receive a payment for \$2 per paid attendance PLUS any profit from the conference.
- Attendance - Who came to the conference

- TOTAL
- How many High School students? How many Middle School students?
- How many High School advisors? How many Middle School advisors?
- How many different schools? (count each school separate for those bringing 2 high schools or a middle school and a high school)
- By county isn't necessary, but isn't frowned upon either.
- Evaluations - Report on the results of the evaluation survey used by Region F
- Wrap Up

This is by no means the end all and be all of hosting a conference, but certainly is a good foundation. This handbook could easily have tripled in length or more! Long discussions on the usefulness of committees, benchmarks and "to do lists," planning meetings vs. workdays vs. stress relieving fun days could all have been included.

When organizing and planning, you will also need to cope with questions surrounding group roles and responsibilities compared to individual ones. That is particular import with regard to chairpersons, either overseeing the whole conference or a specific committee. Where does the advisor fit in? What to do about bus drivers? Should we get principals more or less involved? There are dozens of questions that are purposely left untouched as that is precisely how you make it YOUR OWN CONFERENCE, not something produced from a cookie cutter.

And to be brutally honest, the struggles and hardships that come from undertaking such a large scale project is exactly that type of challenge that pushes the council to grow, to mature. The pressure that turns coal into diamonds!

Good luck!

Have fun!

Now, go make some amazing memories!