

The Need for More Parental Engagement in Education ***School Council as the Vehicle***

Background

In 2009 Education Minister Dave Hancock launched a new province-wide initiative called Inspiring Education. Albertans were invited to share ideas about the characteristics of an educated Albertan in 2030, and participate in a generative dialogue about a preferred education system that would assist in their production. Minister Hancock inspired Albertans to take a critical look at the future of education in Alberta and how it could be transformed over the next generation.

During the course of the initiative, several themes emerged, one of which was the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education. Research has indicated the importance of parents being involved with their children's education, and the benefits that accrue for those children whose parents take an active role at home and in the school. Research has also focused on groups of parents engaged with school improvement, working in conjunction with the school principal through school council. One such piece of research from Ontario points out when parents on school council are engaged in school improvement processes, they can positively influence outcomes. The excerpt below, from research led by Ken Leithwood for the Ontario Ministry of Education, highlights this theme:

Prior evidence suggests that when parents assume leadership roles on school councils, in close partnership with principals, their influence on both the content and processes of school improvement is considerable.

In the case studies, parents, school councils and the school community were involved in a variety of ways in the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans. In the early stages, parents contributed important information that helped to shape school plans through vehicles such as surveys, interviews and meetings. They participated in school improvement teams and in school councils as partners with teachers and administrators in creating workable plans. School councils served as vehicles for communication about plans and actions, and for approval of project participation and school improvement plans.

During implementation, parents and school councils were instrumental in organizing parent involvement activities.¹

This discussion paper contemplates future parental engagement in education and focuses on a currently existing vehicle for such engagement, the school council.

School Council as a Vehicle for Parent Engagement – Current Situation

The *Alberta School Act* describes school council as a vehicle for one type of parental engagement in education – advising the principal and the school board on educational matters.² The *School Councils*

¹ Parents Participation in School Improvement Processes, page 4/5
Final Report of the Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning Project
Ken Leithwood, Research Team Leader
Canadian Education Association, 2004

² *Alberta School Act*, Section 22



Regulation further defines school council, and some roles and responsibilities related to it. Although the legislation is over fifteen years old and there have been efforts to bring more parents and community (as advisors) into decision-making processes at the school and jurisdiction level, school council has not been as effective a vehicle for parental engagement, as was anticipated when they were legislated.

There have been, and continue to be, many factors influencing how successful the model is for encouraging parental involvement and engagement. The attitude of the principal, and his or her willingness or ability to create the environment for meaningful and authentic parental engagement, was cited in a consultation conducted in 2004³ and reiterated in a 2008 study conducted by the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA).⁴ The 2008 study also indicated the main focus of most school councils remained on fundraising. Fifty-five percent of school council members and 46% of chairs indicated fundraising was their top priority. Today's parents' busy life is another factor which limits their ability to be involved or engaged.

School council, albeit not always living up to its full potential, is a known and accepted entity within Alberta's current education system. An enhanced role for school council, a shift in attitude among educational professionals, parents and trustees, and some legislative and regulatory changes, would position school councils as a viable vehicle for parental and broader school community engagement at the local, regional and provincial levels.

Enhanced Role for School Council

In addition to the primary advisory function, the following suggested roles could expand parental engagement opportunities both within and outside of school council:

Recognizing school council involvement is one way for parents to be engaged, school council can act as the agent that encourages a variety of ways for parents to get involved with their children's education and participate in the school.

A coordinating body for all volunteer/engagement/involvement activities in the school/at the regional level (in consultation with the principal/school board):

School Council:

1. Develops and deploys a "skills bank" or expertise list of members of the school's community
 - Coordinates community members activities in the school, i.e. guest speakers in classrooms, mentoring opportunities, presentations at school events such as assemblies, themed activities (e.g. Remembrance Day), reading buddies, hands-on activities related to curriculum (model airplane building, pemmican making, etc.), and the school's culture
 - Coordinates deploying community members to other schools in the jurisdiction, interacting with other school councils by sharing lists and coordinating efforts – this would encourage community members and parents to visit other schools

³ Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and findings of the provincial consultation, Kaleidoscope Consulting, 2004

⁴ Alberta School Councils Survey 2008: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges



2. Assists with planning and coordinating family engagement events in school community
 - Family reading night, curriculum overview evenings, speakers on various topics such as parenting or discipline, projects such as artist in residence, building environmental gardens – events and projects geared to bringing families and community into the school

3. Is engaged with selecting the school principal and superintendent
 - Subject to the policy of the school division, involvement could range from the school council developing, in consultation with parents in the school community, a list of preferred characteristics, skills and attributes of a school principal or superintendent, to appointing a school council member or parent in the school community to a selection committee

Enabling a new and expanded school council role – creating the conditions for success

Despite fifteen years and the best efforts of many, school council parents, principals and school boards continue to struggle with the concept of school council. How can school council be expected to take on more?

The following suggestions would go a long way to improving school council effectiveness and inspiring greater parental participation and engagement. Leadership and motivation are key factors in effecting change. The belief expressed by the Minister of Education in legislation, and the words and actions of key community and regional leaders will underpin the conditions for successful and sustained parental engagement in education.

Conditions for Success – striving for the perfect world of engagement and involvement

Government of Alberta

1. Embraces the principles outlined in Inspiring Action on shared responsibility and engaged communities⁵
2. Creates legislation, regulation and policy that expects/demands engagement of parents and community by
 - a. Eliminating fundraising by school council
 - b. Expecting school council to advise on school improvement planning, including the development, implementation and monitoring of the plan
 - c. Expecting school council to act as the coordinating body for engagement activities
 - d. Embedding the importance of school council and parental engagement in provincial policy
 - e. Expecting local and regional governors to ensure appropriate supports are in place to foster conditions conducive to effective school councils and parental engagement
 - f. Holding regional and local governors accountable for demonstrating parental engagement practices

⁵ Inspiring Action on Education, Government of Alberta, page 8



3. Provides support for new initiatives that encourage parental/community, school council engagement at the local, regional and provincial levels by
 - a. Creating a “parental and community engagement initiative” fund to which school jurisdictions may apply (could be in conjunction with AISI)
 - b. Showcases and encourages sharing promising engagement practices (could be in conjunction with ASCA or AISI conference)

School Jurisdiction Governing Body and Superintendent

1. Embraces a culture of shared decision-making – promotes the inclusion of individuals (parents) or groups (school councils) in appropriate decision-making contexts by
 - a. Creating school council and parental engagement policy
 - b. Examining existing policies and procedures to identify unintended barriers to engagement
 - c. Appointing parent(s) to board of governors (school board) for liaison/communication purposes
 - d. Providing school councils with membership in ASCA; encouraging attendance at ASCA training opportunities and conference events
 - e. Creating a regional level representative council of local school community councils and meeting with them to discuss relevant educational matters on a regular basis
 - f. Asking school councils to participate in visioning for the region/district
 - g. Inviting school council parents to participate on regional level committees and at regional events
 - h. Expecting school principals to create environments that are conducive to engagement
 - i. Inviting parental participation in hiring practices
 - j. Providing school council/parental engagement information at staff induction, orientation and in-service events
2. Expects parental engagement in every school community by
 - a. Expecting school policy to reflect regional beliefs regarding parental engagement and school council and embedding belief in authentic parental engagement in policy and procedures
 - b. Providing training and skill development to principals and school councils on roles and responsibilities
 - c. Expecting and holding principals accountable for creating inviting environments/learning communities in which parents feel welcome to be a part

School Principal/Leader:

1. Is able to bring people to a common vision for student success, of which all (professional and non-professional staff, parents, grandparents, and elders) feel a part by
 - a. Believing that parents are an integral part of student, school and system success and expecting his/her staff to also believe (policy)
 - b. Inviting school council to advise and participate in school improvement plans
 - c. Creating an environment that encourages a “learning community” of which parents are a part
 - d. Providing regular information on student success in clear, understandable language



Parents/Guardians:

1. Genuinely want to be involved and engaged, through school council, for the purpose of advising on student, school and system success
2. Believe there are a variety of ways to be involved, and that no one way is more important than another
3. Are aware, knowledgeable and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of all participants in the school and system
4. Are aware, knowledgeable and understanding of how the system “works”
5. When offered opportunities, will make a real effort to be engaged

Community/Neighbourhood:

1. Shares the vision and feels a fundamental connection to it
2. Offers support in a variety of ways and means
3. Is proud of students and the learning “space” of which the community is a part

Students:

1. Understand their parents and community are expecting them to excel and succeed and are supportive of their learning efforts
2. Understand the shared vision of the school and community and realize they are a part of it

What else needs to be done?

Shifting the attitudes of parents, principals, superintendents and school trustees about the positive benefits an effective and highly functioning school council or group of parents can have in education is not an easy task. Legislation, regulation, policy and practice can set a framework for enhanced engagement, but people must be willing to make the effort, and it will not happen overnight. Other strategies to improve engagement are:

1. Examine leadership skill building by
 - a. Scrutinizing teacher/principal/educational leader preparation and induction – inject parental engagement and school council role into training (teacher prep; induction for new vice principals and principals; CASS Leadership Dimensions, School Leadership Framework etc)
 - b. Identifying parent “leader(s)” in learning communities – build on their strengths and use them to engage others; offer training to help them become effective school council/engagement leaders
 - c. Creating, marketing and delivering an ASCA school council leadership certificate program
2. Create a movement by
 - a. Using exemplars of the type of people/schools/governors who are living a shared vision and making a positive difference in school/jurisdiction improvement
 - b. Spreading the “engagement” word – find and use “champions” of engagement
 - c. Examining , building, and using social networks to create buzz and conversations about learning communities and how people could be engaged (on-line or otherwise)



- d. Initiating some family/community/learning projects in school communities coordinated by school councils – begin to draw people in to the learning community through relevant projects that include a variety of community based people
- e. Inspiring people to want to belong – personalize, make it relevant, invite, seek ways to include those who cannot be physically present

Some Indicators and Outcomes: A Perfect World of Parental Engagement

What could the ideal world of parental engagement in education look like?

- Parents are engaged in and supportive of their child’s learning
- Parents are aware, knowledgeable and involved in school improvement planning
- Parents feel welcome to contribute to and in the school in a variety of ways
- Parents who are unable to come to the school have other ways available to them to connect and contribute
- School improvement plan indicates parents have been involved in its creation, implementation and evaluation
- Parents are using strategies at home to further the goals expressed in the school’s improvement plan
- Parents are part of the implementation of AISI projects in the school or the jurisdiction
- Principals welcome and embrace parents as partners in education, and seek ways to involve them in the learning community
- School board policies and practices reflect the belief parents are important contributors to student success

CONCLUSION

School council is a ready-made engagement vehicle currently existing in most Alberta schools. Although the concept of school council is understood and practiced with varying degrees of success, there exists an excellent opportunity to build on the school council “model” to encourage parents to bring their collective voice to school and regional leaders, advise on school and system improvement plan goals, and enhance multiple ways parents could be involved in their children’s education at the school and regional level.

An opportunity also exists with the rewriting of the *Alberta School Act* and subsequent regulation and policy to use school council to demonstrate the positive, collaborative difference a group of aware, knowledgeable parents can make in energizing a school community. Embedding in legislation, regulation, policy and practice, the belief that parents can and do make contributions beyond their own children’s learning success will go a long way to improving their engagement. If nothing else, legislating the removal of the ability for school councils to fundraise, as a first step, would begin to change attitudes and shift opinions about the meaning of the phrase “parental engagement”.

Shifting attitudes and creating a culture of engagement is not an easy task. The Alberta School Councils’ Association has the means, expertise and willingness to lead and be a part of the shift.

