

A First Look at School Planning Councils in BC



by

Frances Thorsen

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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Helen Raham, Editor

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SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

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Chapter 1. Introduction

School Planning Councils (SPC) were legislated in British Columbia in July 2002. The 2002-03 school year was designated as a transitional period in which schools and districts developed the policies and processes which would contribute to the successful operation of SPCs. In June 2003, a small pilot survey was conducted to begin the important process of collecting baseline data on the work of School Planning Councils. It was administered on a voluntary basis to SPC members in two participating schools districts. The purpose of the survey was to illustrate the early work of councils, providing data related to the nature of their structures and processes, goals, involvement in School Plans, perceived needs, challenges, and degree of success in fulfilling the provincial mandate in their first year of implementation. The information gained from the pilot survey will be used to refine a survey to be administered province-wide to all School Planning Council members in the spring of 2004.

The research was commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, a non-profit educational research agency, and was funded by the Max Bell Foundation.

Methodology

Following a review of the research related to school councils in other provinces, a survey was drafted in March 2003 that incorporated many key aspects of their development and operation in the education system. The survey questions were reviewed and refined by an Advisory Committee with special expertise in this field.

The survey (see Appendix A) contained 66 questions arranged in four sections: *Background Information*; *Development*; *Degree of Success in Fulfilling the Provincial Mandate*; and *Resources and Support*. Respondents were asked to rank their responses according to either of two Likert scales:

- a) 1, *All of the time*; 2, *Frequently*; 3, *Sometimes*; 4, *Rarely*; 5, *Never*
- b) 1, *Strongly Agree*; 2, *Agree*; 3, *Undecided*; 4, *Disagree*; 5, *Strongly Disagree*

Several question required Yes/No responses and others required narrative responses. Additional comments could be made after each section.

The pilot survey was distributed in early June 2003, a busy time of year for schools. The communication package accompanying the survey (See Appendices B-D) included a letter to the superintendent, a letter to the school principal, and a letter for council members containing instructions for completing the survey. Completed surveys were to be collected and returned to the researcher by the school principal by June 18, 2003. Anonymity for respondents was assured.

Each survey was numbered and cross-referenced with a list of participating schools to avoid duplicate survey returns which would invalidate the results.

A significant factor in determining the participation rate was the timing of the survey. As the 2002/2003 school year was a transitional one for School Planning Councils, many were still grappling with the implementation process. Of the ten school districts approached, three agreed to participate in the pilot survey. Returned surveys were received from SD 42, Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows and SD 63, Saanich. Schools in the third district were given the option of participating or not and all declined to participate. A total of 57 School Planning Council members from 16 schools answered the survey.

The report on this pilot survey is divided into the following chapters: the provincial context for School Planning Councils, a brief review of the research on school councils across Canada, the findings of the BC survey, the interpretation of those findings, and recommendations.

Chapter 2. The BC Context

In 2002, the government of British Columbia mandated that School Planning Councils (SPC) be organized for every school. As with their counterparts in most other provinces, SPCs are to act in an advisory capacity, developing school growth plans that will be submitted to school boards. These plans focus on student achievement, defined as "...include[ing] intellectual, human and social development, and career development"¹.

Smaller in size than other Canadian councils, each School Planning Council consists of the principal, three parents, one teacher, and a student representative in the case of secondary schools. Of the three parents, who are to be elected by their school Parent Advisory Council (PAC), one must be a PAC executive officer. The position of Chair is not stipulated in the legislation. Few districts with developed policy have designated one particular member to be Chair. Practice in this regard varies; for example, School District #47 stipulates that the Principal is *not* to be the Chair, while SD #54 has stated it is to be the principal or the principal designate. The BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC) suggests this position be filled by the most qualified member (BCCPAC, 2002).

Roles and Responsibilities

British Columbia's *School Amendment Act, 2002*, contains major amendments to the *School Act*. [One] amendment [is] intended to: recognize the importance of parental involvement in how schools operate"². According to the *Act*, British Columbia's School Planning Councils are to collaboratively advise their School Boards on the allocation of staff and resources (not defined) of their school, matters in the school board's accountability contract that relate to the school, and educational services and programs provided in the school. They are not to advise on personnel issues, complaints, or confidential personal information of students, parents, or employees. "The major responsibility of School Planning Councils is to consult with the school community in developing, monitoring, and reviewing school plans for improving student achievement"³.

The School Board ensures that School Planning Councils are established each school, determines a timeline for their work, and ensures a process for appropriate consultation with all stakeholders during the development of the School Plan and in presentation of the Plan to the Board. Responsibilities of the various SPC members are defined by the Ministry of Education.

¹ British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2001). Accountability Homepage. Retrieved June 1, 2003 from http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/policy/policies/accountability-_framework.htm#definitions

² British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2002). Bill 34, School Amendment Act, 2002. Retrieved November 4, 2002 from http://www.legis.govbc.ca/37th3rd/3rd_read/-gov343.htm

³ British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2001). Interim guidelines for School Planning Councils: 2002-2003. The Mandate. Retrieved November 4, 2002 from <http://www.-bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/mandate.html>

The principal's duties revolve around leadership, communication, and providing data and information on the school's student achievement and the district accountability contract. The principal must also ensure that the School Plan developed by the SPC has been a collaborative effort on behalf of all of the members *and* the school community.

Parent Advisory Council members on the SPC, elected by secret ballot, are to work in collaboration with the principal to establish effective communication with the community and SPC. They are required to consult on an ongoing basis with the school's Parent Advisory Council. BCCPAC President, Reggi Balabanov, reported that "[s]ince school planning councils were announced in the spring, parents have shown tremendous interest in learning how they work. Parents are ready to participate and work effectively beside our education partners"⁴.

The teacher representative is to gather input and direction from the school's teachers and effectively communicate to keep them informed of the SPC's work. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) has recommended that the teacher representative be the union representative from the school staff. The legislation's stipulation that no parent may be an SPC member if employed by a school district has met with some consternation on behalf of teachers. The Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association finds the mandate discriminatory and is boycotting School Planning Councils (Steffenhagen, 2002). The BCTF's *Staff School Alert* (June 19, 2002) advises teachers that some Parent Advisory Committees will not participate in SPCs:

*A number of school Parent Advisory Committees are voting not to participate in School Planning Councils. They see the SPCs as limiting parent participation because only three parents will be on the inside. They prefer to maintain an open and inclusive parent group through the PAC. Teachers need to consider parents' views before opting to take part.*⁵

The School Planning Councils initiative was introduced during a period of considerable change in the provincial education system and within a highly-charged labour relations climate. As a result, 2002-03 was designated as a transition year to provide School Boards with the flexibility required to align their current planning processes with the new model. All partner groups were involved in meetings to develop implementation guidelines and training programs to facilitate the shift in culture and new roles envisioned. A provincial symposium was sponsored by the Ministry of Education on September 23, 2002 at which representatives from all groups examined the concept and provided feedback on the attendant challenges and opportunities in its implementation. In-service workshops for SPC members were subsequently held in many school districts on the respective roles of principals, teachers and parents. BCCPAC sponsored a series of on-going workshops (Levels I and II) to facilitate effective parent involvement in SPC and share best practices on consultation, goal-setting, information-gathering, communication and more.

School districts are at various stages in their development of policy with reference to School Planning Councils. Some policies have been passed and amended; others are in draft stages. Of the nine districts with policies posted on the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) website⁶,

⁴ BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. (September, 2002). BCCPAC Initiates Province Wide Parent Education Series IMPACT, 14 (1), Retrieved November 6, 2002 from <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/mandate.htm>

⁵ British Columbia Teachers' Federation. (June 19, 2002). School Planning Councils - there's no hurry Staff School Alert. Retrieved on November 10, 2002 from <http://www.bctf.bc.ca/SchoolStaffAlert/Archive-/2001-02/2002-06-19.html>

⁶ Policies from the following districts are posted on the BCSTA website: School District #42, (Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows); School District #47 Powell (River); School District #53 (Okanagan Similkameen);

most follow a standardized form allowing for elections of officers, minute-taking, responsibilities of the Council, liaison school board person, and draft School Plan⁷ procedures and due dates. Decision making is to be via consensus and if consensus cannot be reached, then a majority vote shall take place. Policies also specify that SPCs will consult with their PACs, other teaching staff at the school, and community members. Most district policies have wording similar to School District #58 with respect to the teacher member elected: “[4.2.b] one (1) of the teachers at the school, elected annually by secret ballot by the teachers who teach at the school”⁸ with the exception of School District #69 whose policy states “the school's MATA [Mount Arrowsmith Teachers’ Association] Staff Rep will be responsible for the election of the teacher and alternate representatives”⁹. This coincides with the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation’s (BCTF) policy adopted in the spring of 2002:

1. *That teachers be advised to participate in School Planning Councils as follows:*
 - a. *That the teacher representative on the SPC be part of the staff union leadership in the school.*
 - b. *That the teacher representative report back to the union in the school*¹⁰

The Superintendent’s Perspective

To provide an overview of the level of implementation of School Planning Councils in the province at the close of the transitional year, BC superintendents were emailed a brief questionnaire in June 2003 (see Appendix E). Of the 14 districts that replied, thirteen indicated School Planning Councils had been established; in the remaining district, they were under development.

Although the majority of responding districts had School Planning Councils, they were at varying degrees of School Plan completion. Some superintendents indicated the emphasis to date had been on training and development rather than School Plans; others expected SPCs would present their School Plans to the school board in October 2004. Still others responded that all School Plans are currently being analyzed at the district level, have been filed with the school board, or have been accepted or modified. Four districts confirmed all SPCs had reported to their boards, but had not yet received written or oral responses.

The existing district planning practices and timelines and Ministry of Education timelines have influenced the School Plan development and submission timelines for School Planning Councils.

School District #54 (Bulkley Valley); School District #57 (Prince George); School District #58 (Nicola-Similkameen); School District #61 (Greater Victoria); School District #69 (Qualicum); School District #91 (Nechako Lakes)

⁷ Not all districts use the term ‘School Plan’, other terms are School Improvement Plan, School Growth Plan, or school plan for student success (SPSS)

⁸The Board of School Trustees of School District #58. *School Planning Councils. School District #58 (Nicola-Similkameen)*. Policy No. 1006, Date Approved: January 22, 2003. Retrieved March 28, 2003 from <http://www.bcsta.-org/policy/polindex.htm>

⁹ The Board of School Trustees of School District #69. *School Planning Councils School District #69 (Qualicum)*. Policy No. 3030, Date Approved: December 17, 2002. Retrieved March 28, 2003 from <http://www.bcsta.-org/policy/polindex.htm>

¹⁰ British Columbia Teachers’ Federation. (n.d.). *School Planning Councils - BCTF advice and policy*. Retrieved December 5, 2003 from www.bctf.bc.ca/education/-SPC/AdviceAndPolicy.html

Most current district planning cycles revolve around the requirement to submit a district Accountability Plan to the Ministry of Education by October 31 each year. School Plans will be an important part of the District Accountability Plan in most districts.

Nine of the 14 districts had provided their School Planning Councils with a School Plan template. Some templates mirrored the existing School Growth Plan template or the ten criteria used in the external reviews by the Ministry. In some districts, elementary and middle school templates had been established, but the School Plan template for secondary schools was still under development.

Superintendents were also asked to comment on the degree to which their SPC have grasped and successfully accomplished their mandate. Responses to this question were mixed, especially in relation to knowledge. Five superintendents responded affirmatively that their SPCs were off to a positive start in terms of training and understanding. In some districts SPCs were progressing on somewhat of a broken front, as captured in these responses:

SPCs are at various stages of knowledge and comfort. It's a work in progress, with schools at different stages of development. Still on the learning curve, but better grasp after first effort. Further work, especially on data required.

Although one superintendent indicated that in this transition year, *a number of SPCs were slow in getting off the ground*, most spoke very positively about the overall successes of their SPC. There was sense that despite the additional work entailed in their first year of implementation, the overall impact had been positive.

It has provided a good positive focus for schools and has caused schools to look carefully at and create reliable student achievement data. SPC were involved in data analysis in many cases.

We accomplished our goal to have SPCs in place and operating in all schools and to have offered appropriate training.

Parents already feel more involved.

When asked about the most significant challenges, superintendents flagged important issues around training, roles and responsibilities, and governance. These are consistent with the findings of the pilot survey administered to SPC members and the findings from similar surveys in other provinces. A number of superintendents underlined the need for clearer role definition and developing a sense of teamwork among council members. Where principals perceived the SPC as a threat to their authority, parents were overly aggressive, or teachers withdrew from participation, this was more difficult to achieve.

As with other research done in the area of school councils, training and in-service surfaced as a major challenge.

It is very difficult for people to understand the nature of the work involved. There is a great deal of work to be done in the area of data analysis and interpretation and creating realistic, worthwhile plans.

In reference to the quality of the school improvement planning process and its product - the School Plan, superintendents' responses ranged from high praise to reserved judgment at this stage. Several felt the training for SPC members that occurred made a significant difference in the quality of their work. In their view, the SPC processes tended to be *data-driven, and data analysis was outstanding, better than [it] ever was with accreditation. Thanks to the provincial training initiative, our training and planning processes have been excellent. Our school plans are very well done.*

The resources that were made available to SPCs during the development of the School Plan included data from a broad range of sources: satisfaction surveys, student participation rates, assessments based on performance standards, district-wide writing and reading assessments, FSA and provincial exam results, and district policies regarding annual improvement plans.

Several superintendents drew attention to the need for thorough monitoring of School Plans in order to evaluate their success: *Is the plan implemented? Does it remain a living document? Did it get results?* This suggests an on-going district level process for monitoring the impact of the annual School Plans is an important aspect of the success of the School Planning Council initiative. As well, there is a need for the integration of the school planning processes with district planning processes and the submission of the annual Accountability Plan to the Ministry.

These insights furnished by BC's school superintendents provide a valuable back-drop to the findings of the survey administered to School Planning Councils in their transitional year which offer a more detailed glimpse of the processes, procedures, goals, and impressions of the members themselves. We will turn our attention to the survey findings after a brief review of the literature on school councils in the following chapter.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

O ntario, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, the Yukon, and Newfoundland and Labrador all have legislated school councils to act in an advisory capacity to their school boards, with the greatest authority accorded to Yukon and Quebec school councils. Although school councils vary in size, membership, and name across Canada, their functions and mandate are generally similar:

School Councils, on behalf of the communities served by the school, are responsible for working with parents, teachers, students and the community to review the direction of the school, identify education priorities, recommend strategies for achieving goals, and assess and report progress¹¹.

Newfoundland and Labrador School Councils, established in 1997, must consist of the principal, *at least three parents, at least two teachers, at least two community representatives, and at least one senior high school student (Schools Act, 1997, Section 56)*. The chair is elected by each Council but must not be the principal. The chair and the principal work collaboratively.

Nova Scotia's schools were mandated to have School Advisory Councils of no fewer than 5 and no more than eighteen members – the principal, *at least one teacher, at least one support staff, at least one parent, at least two students (grade 7 and up) or at least two students of elementary age if a provision is made according to the Act, and at least one community member*. No more than one third of the committee members may be from any one area of membership (unless otherwise agreed upon). Some of the School Advisory Council's duties include:

- (a) *after consult[ing] with the staff of the school, develop[ing] and recommend[ing] to the school board a school improvement plan;*
- (b) *prepar[ing] an annual report in such form and containing such information as the Minister determines;*
- (c) *advis[ing] on the development of school policies that promote academic excellence and a positive learning environment;*
- (d) *advis[ing] the principal and staff of the school on curriculum and programs, school practices, student discipline, fund-raising and parent-school communication and similar matters;*

¹¹ Alberta Education. (March, 1999). *School Councils Handbook: Meaningful involvement for the school community*. Revised. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Education. Retrieved November 4, 2002 from http://www.learning.-gov.ab.ca-parents-school_cou_handbook.pdf

- (e) *advis[ing] the school board on curriculum and programs, student-support services, policy development, funding, communication strategies and similar matters;*
- (f) *participat[ing] in the selection of the principal of the school by representation on the school board's selection committee*¹²

New Brunswick's *Education Act* was changed in 2001 to provide for one Parent School Support Committee (PSSCs) per school. These parent-based committees are involved in school improvement plans.

The Parent School Support Committees are responsible for:

- *participating in the selection of the school principal;*
- *advising the principal on the establishment, implementation and monitoring of the school improvement plan which may include the school mission, strategies respecting language and culture, communication, school climate, family involvement, conditions to improve the quality of learning within the school, improving school property and facilitating use of the school by the community;*
- *participat[ing] in the selection of the vice-principal;*
- *provid[ing] input on the performance evaluation of the principal and vice-principal;*
- *review[ing] the school performance reports;*
- *advis[ing] the principal in the development of school policies;*
- *communicat[ing] with the DEC [District Education Councils which replaced the District Parent Advisory Committees, the Anglophone and Francophone Boards of Education] on PSSC issues*¹³.

In 1998, Quebec established School Governing Boards. Their membership may not exceed twenty and includes voting parents and school staff, and non-voting community and student members. There must be an equal number of parents and staff. Governing Boards are to be chaired by a parent member. As their name suggests, School Governing Boards have somewhat greater powers than school councils in other provinces. Their mandate is "...to develop, encourage and promote policies, practices and activities to enhance the quality of school programs and the levels of student achievement in the school"¹⁴.

Ontario's local School Councils, first established in the 1995/1996 school year under Ontario Regulation 612/00, are composed of parents, the principal or vice-principal, one teacher, one non-teaching staff representative, one or more community members, and one student if at a high school. Student membership is optional at the elementary school level (Ontario Regulation 612/00). Parent members are to be the majority of the Council and a parent member must chair or co-chair the School Council. The Councils are to act in an advisory capacity to the school principal and Ontario School Boards; their purpose is to increase student achievement. They

¹² Nova Scotia Ministry of Education. (1996). *Education Act: Chapter 1 of the Acts of 1995-96, School Advisory Councils*. Retrieved December 20, 2002 from <http://www.gov.-ns.ca/legi/legc/~sol.htm>

¹³New Brunswick Department of Education. (2003). *Governance*. Retrieved March 5, 2003 from <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/gov-e.asp>

¹⁴Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation. (1996). *Education Act, Bill 48, 1996, Section 26*

advise on topics such as the school calendar year, program priorities, and school budget priorities (Education Improvement Commission, November, 1998).

The Manitoba Education and Youth Ministry agrees that parent involvement in education makes a difference to the success of its students. "Many schools have created school-based and/or school division/district-based implementation teams to plan the implementation of new policies and curricula, and to organize and lead ongoing staff development and support activities within the school and/or school division/district. These teams can also help to inform the local community about the change taking place in schools as new policies and curricula are implemented"¹⁵. Members of the school based teams include administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members. Parents are encouraged to help with the school plans and other initiatives affecting their schools.

School Community Councils in Saskatchewan include the principal, parents, teachers, support staff, secondary students (high schools only) and members of the community. As with other school councils, parents hold a majority of seats. The size of the council depends on the needs of the individual school.

Alberta's School Councils, established in 1994 are similar in composition to those in Ontario. They consist of the principal, *at least* one teacher, *at least* one community representative, and *at least* one senior high school student where applicable. Elementary and junior high schools shall have seven or more council members; senior high schools shall have nine or more. The majority of the membership must be parents. The principal decides who will be Chair of the School Council. These School Councils advise on community relations, programming, and school planning, and are designed to foster "commitment and creativity, (which) will generate a strong community spirit"¹⁶.

School Councils in the Yukon vary in size. Three to seven parent and community members – a parent who is an employee of the school may not be a member - advise their school board about school plans, length of the school year, programs, staffing needs, and transportation. They also make recommendations for their school budget and participate in hiring the school principal. The school board makes the final decisions related to school plans, budgeting, staffing, and any other factor that affects the schools. The School Council Liaison Officer, a senior member of the Department of Education, along with the Superintendent and school administrators, provide resources and answer questions.

The foregoing broad overview of school councils across Canada, suggests their purpose is two-fold: firstly, to advise boards on student achievement and secondly, to actively acknowledge, engage, and promote direct parental involvement in the collective review and planning for school progress.

Parental Involvement

The education of a child is neither left solely to parents nor schools but involves a carefully intertwined relationship that is fostered through the interaction of three major stakeholders -

¹⁵ Manitoba Education and Youth, (2002). *Introduction to a Prairie tour: Supporting change*. Retrieved January 7, 2003 from <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/tech/imym/-teacher/prairietour/intro-sc.html>

¹⁶ Alberta Home and School Councils' Association. (2002). *Stay informed*. Retrieved November 4, 2002 from <http://www.ahsca.ab.ca/test/council.html>

parents, educators, and the community. All have the responsibility of contributing to a child's education (Chen, 2001; Collins, 2000; Epstein, 1986, 1995; Fullan, 1991; Lamm, 2003).

Studies show that the extent to which children are ready to learn and to achieve in school depends also on support from families, with greater family involvement in children's learning identified as a critical link to achieving a high-quality education in a safe, disciplined, learning environment¹⁷.

Dr. Joyce Epstein, Director of the John Hopkins University Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, has studied partnerships between parents, schools, and communities. Epstein identified six fundamental practices¹⁸ that contribute to effective community/school/parental involvement.

Type 1--Parenting: *Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.*

Type 2--Communicating: *Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.*

Type 3--Volunteering: *Improve recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.*

Type 4--Learning At Home: *Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities and decisions.*

Type 5--Decision Making: *Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.*

Type 6--Collaborating with the Community: *Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community¹⁹.*

Two more practices have been embedded into the model by the Ontario School Council Support Centre (2000). They are fundraising and organizing/attending social events.

As Epstein and others point out, parent involvement in decision-making is an important factor leading to increased student achievement (Atkinson, 1997; Carey & Farris, 1996; Carey, Lewis,

¹⁷ N. Carey & E. Farris. (1996). *Parents and Schools: Partners in Student Learning*. National Center for Education Statistics U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement NCES 96-913, p.1.

¹⁸ Epstein's six practices have been used as a foundation for educational programs throughout Canada and the United States. Her work has led to the development of the National Network of Partnership Schools, and was the framework used in the September, 2001 survey of public K-8 schools (Chen), and is supported by the Ontario School Council Support Centre.

¹⁹ Epstein, J.L., Coates, L., Salinas, K.C., Sanders, M.G., & Simon, B.S. (1997). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Retrieved on May 3, 2003 from <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.-htm>

& Ferris, 1996; Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 2000; Chen 2001; Collins, 2000; Education Improvement Commission, May, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2000; Epstein, 1992, 1995; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Vista School Board, 2000; IRI/Skylight Training and Publishing, Inc., 1996; Sheldon, 2003; U.S. Department of Education: Planning and Evaluation Service, 1994; Vaden-Kiernan & Chandler, 1996).

[It] is one of the most significant factors contributing to a child's success in school. When parents are involved in their children's education, the level of student achievement increases. Students attend school more regularly, complete more homework in a consistent manner, and demonstrate more positive attitudes towards school. They also are more likely to complete high school²⁰

Parental involvement is not new to schools in British Columbia. The BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC), is the provincial umbrella organization for each school's parent association, which is called a Parent Advisory Council. BCCPAC acts as an advocate for all parents of British Columbian students. Their purpose is:

To advance the public school education and well-being of children in the province of BC

To carry on activities to promote and enhance meaningful parent participation in an advisory role at the school, school district and provincial levels²¹

The Minister of Education consults with BCCPAC on issues such as Aboriginal education, assessment, curriculum, and safety (BCCPAC website). BCCPAC provides parents with resources and support, offers two conferences a year, and networks to keep parents apprised of new developments in areas that government affects education. District and local PACs work to carry out BCCPAC's purposes helping schools with individual school issues. Parent Advisory Councils (PAC) have long been active in fundraising and other activities.

Partners in School Improvement Processes

The formation of School Planning Councils provides a new dimension of parental involvement. It offers parents the opportunity to contribute jointly with other stakeholders to the development of school improvement plans submitted to their school boards. In this way, parents are considered "...true, not token, contributors to school decisions..." (Epstein, 1992, pp. 1145-1146). The development of plans with parental input is something that has also been tried in the United States. Known as School Development Plans, research indicates improvement in overall achievement when parents participate in the school planning process (Sheldon, 2003). Carey and Farris (1996) reported that elementary schools that had a policy council "...were significantly more likely to consider parent input to a great or moderate extent than those without these kinds of groups" (p. 6). Schools with policy councils gave 44% greater or moderate consideration of parental input to the allocation of funds and 53% to curriculum and overall programs (Carey and Farris, 1996).

²⁰ Education Improvement Commission. (November, 1998). *The Road Ahead – III: A Report on the Role of School Councils*. Retrieved January 14, 2003 from <http://eic.edu.gov.on.ca/eicroot-english-public-sihand-sihande.pdf>

²¹ BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. (n.d.). *Who are we?* Retrieved January 6, 2003 from <http://www.bccpac.bc.ca/whoarewe/WhoAreWe-Main.htm>

A body of research supports the provision of hands-on parental and community access to the process of planning for improving their school's student achievement rates (Atkinson, 1997; Education Improvement Commission, November, 1998; Epstein, 1995; Fullan, 1991; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000; Vista School Board, 2000).

Schools must develop collaborative working relationships with parents; create an environment that welcomes parents and encourages them to raise questions and voice their concerns; and provide parents with the information and training they need to become involved in school and at home²².

“The primary goal of school and partnerships – the bottom line for many educators – is to increase student motivation, achievement and success in school” (Epstein, 1992, p. 1140). Partnerships between educators, parents, and their community members support the goal of meeting the diverse needs of individual student populations. “[S]chools must improve education for all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if schools, families, and communities work together to promote successful students” (Epstein, 2000, Homepage). Together these stakeholders are capable of offering stronger support to the schools. Working in this manner, they also provide a model for the students of progressive team-building, collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility, communication, and accountability (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001).

Developing partnerships within the community results in strong relationships between educators, associations, churches, community services, and local businesses (Education Improvement Commission, 1998) all with the same target in mind, the well-being of the community's students.

School councils generally follow Epstein's inclusive model. “Education is a partnership involving parents, students, teachers, principals, school boards, government, and the community”²³. The Ontario Ministry of Education, (2001) encourages school councils to be a part of the team, strengthening the partnerships that Epstein discusses. Section 17 of the Alberta School Act recognizes and reaffirms the right of parents and the school community to have meaningful involvement in the education of their children through school councils (Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, 2002).

[School Councils] have direct input in school level decisions on curriculum, funding and staffing and they advise other levels, particularly school boards, on policy and practice, ...assume responsibility for seeking ways to increase parent involvement in school life, ...assess and communicate the overall performance of the school under their jurisdiction²⁴.

SPC membership in British Columbia consists of three parents, one teacher, and the principal, with a mandate to advise school boards on school plans that will lead to increased student achievement in their school.

²² X. Chen & K. Chandler. (September, 2001). Efforts by Public K–8 Schools to Involve Parents in Children's Education: Do School and Parent Reports Agree? U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 2001–076 p. 3.

²³ Ontario Ministry of Education. (2001). School councils a guide for members. Retrieved November 14, 2002, from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>

²⁴ Collins, A., Harte, A. & Cooper, J. (n.d.). Enhancing local involvement in education through quality leadership. Retrieved on May 2, 2003 from <http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/-Community/TQLLP/2prospec.htm>

[In British Columbia p]arents will begin working with staff to: understand how and why the school operates as it does examine educational issues and student achievement set

goals for the school and district monitor the effectiveness of school programs and initiatives²⁵.

Findings from Other Studies

A number of provinces have published results of studies on their school councils. The studies were conducted to provide data on their formative years and offer recommendations for support, where necessary, to alleviate problem areas. Similar in nature, the studies investigated training, governance, decision-making procedures, and the relationships among members during the first and subsequent years of operation.

Ontario's *The Road Ahead - III: A Report on the Role of School Councils* (Education Improvement Commission, 1998c), made over forty recommendations to the Ontario government with respect to governance and other particulars regarding school councils. One important finding indicated that school councils ran more efficiently if they had clear and easily understood mandates. Three important areas were highlighted as what school councils should focus upon - school planning; partnerships between community, educators, and schools; and positively influencing the decision-making of those the Councils advise.

The Newfoundland and Labrador *1998 -1999 Survey of School Council Chairpersons* had results consistent with findings in other studies. The Chairs represented a majority of Councils that were in their first operational year. The majority of the Councils had established committees that dealt with such issues as finances, programming, governance, and communication. Half of the Chairs surveyed were satisfied with the amount of training provided. They were concerned with clearly defining the role of School Councils, the training in issues around governance, writing protocol, and conflict resolution.

Barriers mentioned most frequently were lack of training (62.8%), lack of clearly defined role (50%), difficulty in getting parents to serve on council (48%), lack of time (40.2%) and not dealing with educational issues (30.4%).²⁶

The first year of operation for Quebec's School Governing Boards was the 1998/1999 school year. The Ministère de l'Éducation conducted a survey in 1999 to collect data with relation to their governance, training, problem-solving, understanding the Education Act, and relationships.

Although most governing boards took part in training activities they generally found worthwhile, they still had many questions and difficulties, especially as regards

²⁵ BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. (September, 2002). BCCPAC Initiates Province Wide Parent Education Series IMPACT, 14 (1), Retrieved November 6, 2002 from <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc/mandate.htm>

²⁶ Collins, A. (2000). The Effectiveness of School Councils: Views of Chairpersons. Retrieved November 16, 2002 from <http://www.mun.ca/educ/faculty/mwatch/win2000/-collins.html#FOOTNOTE> Collins

*understanding and interpreting the Education Act and understanding their own powers in relation to those of other authorities*²⁷.

Analysis of the responses revealed that training, networking, and resources would aide School Governing Boards in becoming more effective. Some of the recommendations made were to have Governing Boards focus on comparing financial reports and budgets of previous and current years, distributing information necessary for meetings ahead of time to allowing time to become familiar with the agenda item's material, and publishing a newsletter to inform parents of the Governing Board's activities (Giroux, L., Ouellet, M., Violette, M. & Garneau, M., 1999).

The most recent study of Quebec's School Governing Boards was developed by the Groupe d'analyse politique de l'éducation (GAPE), in partnership with the Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur la réussite scolaire (CRIRES) and the Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l'Éducation.

*The objective of the survey is to describe the way the governing boards presently operate from the perspective of their voting members. It aims to provide information concerning the experience of the boards (quality of their implementation, the democratic and decision-making process, decisions made, effects on school life and on students, suggestions for improvement) and concerning their voting members (characteristics, reasons for participating, satisfaction with their board's decisions and assessment of their participation)*²⁸.

Findings of the GAPE survey, released in February 2002, revealed that members saw the principal as having more influence than any other member; teachers were the next most influential. School staff felt that parents had enough influence on the Governing Boards while parents felt the opposite. Overall parents enjoy their governing board responsibilities. "Teachers and non-teaching professionals were the most likely to cite a lack of time or an excessive workload. The parents were more inclined to mention a lack of information or to say there were no problems" (Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l'Éducation, p.19).

Fear of change with respect to decentralizing power was greatest among teachers and least among parents. While 30.1% of school staff respondents totally agreed that "The current decentralization will accentuate the differences among schools", only 14.3% of parent respondents felt this way (Table 17, p. 51). In response to "Recent changes in the education system have occurred too rapidly" (Table 16, p.51), 46.9% of the school staff respondents totally agreed, whereas 30.9% of parents were less in agreement.

Other differences in perspective between staff and parent members were also apparent. Whereas 8% of school staff respondents totally agreed to the statement, "All the changes currently taking place will improve the quality of education" (Table 15, p.51), 14.5% of parents totally agreed. Only 3.2% of staff respondents totally agreed with the statement "The school should be evaluated on the basis of how its students perform", in comparison to 9.4% of parents who totally agreed (Table 19, p. 52).

²⁷ Giroux, Lise, Ouellet, Michel, Violette, Michèle & Garneau, Martin. (1999). Analysis and report. Gouvernement Du Québec, Ministère De L'éducation, pp.47-48. Retrieved November 9, 2003 from http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca-publications-cons_etab_governing.-pdf

²⁸ Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l'Éducation (February, 2002). Summary of the Survey of voting members of governing boards of Québec schools, Quebec: Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l'Éducation. Retrieved January 14, 2003 from <http://www.ulaval.ca/cpires/pdf/enquete.a.pdf>

Overall GAPE and CRIRES concluded that the Governing Boards' first years of operation were successful. It was felt that additional on-going training throughout the year, especially with regard to the interpretation of the Education Act, and the distribution of materials ahead of meetings would encourage better preparation for sound decision-making. The 1998 Ontario's Education Improvement Commission's findings revealed similar perceptions among council members in a study of its school councils.

Ontario's *School Councils: A Guide for Members* outlines what makes an effective school council. Effective councils:

- *are actively involved in setting school priorities for improving student achievement;*
- *promote meaningful parental and community involvement and actively seek the views of their school communities;*
- *have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities;*
- *include members who represent the diverse views of their school communities;*
- *keep well informed about school and board policies and procedures;*
- *have clear and consistent processes for decision making;*
- *communicate with the community about their activities;*
- *maintain high ethical standards;*
- *have members who have developed mutual trust and respect for one another*²⁹.

Are school councils effective in increasing student achievement school-wide? Research is somewhat inconclusive on a direct relationship to support the connection (Collins, 2000; Education Improvement Commission, 1998b; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Sheldon, 2003). Parental involvement, however, creates strong possibilities for the advancement of all students and there is a need for more rigorous research in this area.

Organizational priorities, however, are often in the forefront for councils in beginning stages, as they attempt to create environments that are conducive to putting together the School Plan, deepen the awareness and understanding of relevant materials such as the *School Act* or *Education Act*, financials and programs of past years, and establish operating processes. Collins (2000) cites many issues of governance and lack of training as barriers for Councils and expresses concern that their focus may be diverted from increasing student achievement to operational issues.

*Councils are involved in many issues; however, the focus on school improvement is not evident. It is not clear why this is the case. With so many concerns about lack of time, it seems that council members should want to direct their attention to how their schools are performing and achieving. However, many other issues appear to circumvent what should be the focal enterprise of school councils*³⁰.

As British Columbia's implementation of School Planning Councils is underway, it is important to begin gathering data on their success in accomplishing their mandate. The findings from the pilot School Planning Council Baseline Survey 2002/2003 discussed in the following two chapters will further contribute to the national research base on school councils.

²⁹ Ontario Ministry of Education (2001). *School Councils: A Guide for Members*, p.5.1

³⁰ Collins, A. (2000). *The Effectiveness of School Councils: Views of Chairpersons*. Retrieved November 16, 2002 from <http://www.mun.ca/educ/faculty/mwatch/win2000/-collins.html#FOOTNOTE> Collinsbid.

Chapter 4. The Findings

The findings from each section of the pilot survey of SPC members are presented below. The interpretation of these results is contained in the chapter immediately following.

Part I: Background Information

Section one of the survey was designed to capture a brief profile of the respondents and the structure of their respective School Planning Councils. The 16 participating schools represented the full spectrum of grades, with two K – 5 schools, eight K – 7 schools, one 8 -12 secondary school, and five 9-12 secondary schools. Of the 57 School Planning Council members who returned the survey, 12 were principals, 35 were PAC members, and 10 were teachers. Not every SPC member responded, nor every Chair, and some did not respond to every question. The position of Chair was held by 11 (of 12) principals, 3 (of 35) PAC members, 1 (of 10) teachers, and one SPC has a rotational Chair. These responses answer questions 1 to 3.

Question 4, *Explain how you selected your SPC Chair*, met with various responses. Opinions differed in one SPC as to how the Chair was selected, with respondents answering: *volunteered*, *the most outspoken parent*, *an election*. In another SPC, two respondents indicated it was *volunteered*, while the Chair's response (principal) was *by default*. One PAC member who was Chair, indicated the position was determined by a *vote by PAC members*, while other SPC members including the teacher and principal, stated that the election took place by consensus. A list of responses overall is provided in Figure 4-1 below.

Figure 4-1 - Chair Selection Procedure

Selection Procedure of Chair	Respondent
nomination	1
voted	3
volunteered	6
consensus	8
luck of the draw	2
election	1
mutual agreement	2
verbal acknowledgement + agreement	1

unanimous agreement	1
discussion	2
the most outspoken parent	1
by acclamation of interested parent	2
no one else was willing	1
he offered and no one else challenged	1
self-appointed (or by Principal)	1
was nominated, got consensus and accepted vote	1
vote by PAC members	1
I think we voted or it was just naturally the principal	1
person able to type/take minutes/contact/'gopher'	1
a group decision	1
rotation	2
default	1

Question 5 and questions 7 - 12 required *Yes* or *No* responses. The last column of each figure below is labeled (TR), representing the total number of respondents to the question of the 57 surveys returned. Questions 5 and 6 dealt with voting membership. If the response to Q5 was in the affirmative, narrative detail could be provided in Q6. Not all respondents answered Q6. Of those that did, four SPCs were clear that they had non-voting members, six SPCs were clear that they had no non-voting members. Of the six remaining SPCs, seven members thought they had and 11 members thought they did not have non-voting members on their School Planning Council. (See Figures 4-2 and 4-3 below).

Figure 4-2 - Non-Voting Members

	Yes	No	TR
5. The SPC has non-voting members	21	34	55

Q6, *If yes to 5, what type of non-voting members are there (teachers, students, parents)?* Nineteen respondents of 57 replied to this question. Some gave more than one response.

Figure 4-3 - Type of Non-Voting Member

Type of non-voting member	Number of respondents
parent	4
vice principal	3
teacher	8
support staff	1
students	6
administrators	1
teacher alternates	3
parent alternates	2
any parent or teacher attending the meeting	1
one teacher has attended + helped with note taking	1
CUPE member(s)	3

Question 7, (see Figure 4-4) dealt with the development of operating by-laws. One PAC member inserted the list *Policies/Guidelines/Code of Conduct* in this section.

Figure 4-4 - Bylaws

	Yes	No	TR
7. The SPC has created and approved its own by-laws	12	38	50

Questions 8-12, (see Figure 4-5) related to the training workshops that were offered by the Ministry of Education. These workshops were to inform members of the purpose of the SPC and of members' roles and responsibilities. The responses to the workshops were largely favourable.

Figure 4-5 - Training

	Yes	No	TR
8. At least one SPC training workshop was held in my district	36	0	1
9. I attended (an) SPC training workshop(s). If no, proceed to # 13	46	9	2
10. The workshop(s) explained the purpose of SPCs	50	0	7
11. The workshop(s) were informative about school planning	42	8	7
12. The workshop(s) were informative about my position on the SPC	39	10	8

Part II: Development

Statements 13 to 22 of the survey concern the development and operation of the SPC. These can be sub-categorized into policy, communication, meetings, advice, resources, and relationships. Statements were responded to using a Likert scale of the following measures: 1 All of the time (A); 2 Frequently (F); 3 Sometimes (S); 4 Rarely (R); 5 Never (N). The last column of each table is labeled (TR), representing the number of respondents to the question of the 57 returned surveys. The responses to the statements for Part II: Development follow.

Questions 13 and 14 ask if respondents refer to provincial or district level policies for guidance (See Figure 4-6).

Figure 4-6 - Guidance

	A	F	S	R	N	TR
13. The SPC refers to the School Act for guidance	4	10	16	9	11	50
14. The SPC refers to district level policy and regulations for guidance	11	19	14	7	0	51

Question 15 refers to communication with other SPC. The responses are shown in Figure 4-7.

Figure 4-7 - Communication

	A	F	S	R	N	TR
15. The SPC networks with other SPCs in the district	1	4	12	11	20	48

Questions 16 to 19 refer to SPC meetings. The responses are provided in Figure 4-8.

Figure 4-8 - Meetings

	A	F	S	R	N	TR
16. The SPC makes meeting agendas available to the public	19	9	8	8	6	50
17. The SPC makes meeting minutes available to the public	26	10	4	0	7	47
18. Decisions are made by majority vote	25	6	4	7	9	51
19. Decisions are made by consensus	41	7	2	0	0	50

Figure 4-9 indicates the responses to questions 20 to 22 regarding the obtaining of advice.

Figure 4-9 - Advice

	A	F	S	R	N	TR
20. The SPC seeks advice from the school PAC	20	12	14	5	1	52
21. The SPC seeks advice from the staff at the school	23	16	9	1	0	53
22. The SPC seeks advice from provincial organizations	4	6	10	6	22	48

Statements 23 to 27 employ a different Likert scale, used throughout the remainder of the survey. These statements were responded to using the following measures: 1 Strongly Agree (SA); 2 Agree (A); 3 Undecided (U); 4 Disagree (D); 5 Strongly Disagree (SD). The last column of each figure below represents the total number of respondents to the question of the 57 returns.

Question 23 (See Figure 4-10) refers to information resources.

Figure 4-10 - Provision of Information

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
23. The SPC is provided sufficient information to accomplish its goals	15	22	10	6	0	53

Questions 24 to 27 refer to relationships with SPC members and members and stakeholders while Q28 permitted additional narrative comments for this section. (See Figure 4-11).

Figure 4-11 - Relationships

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
24. I am satisfied with the relationships developed among the SPC members	26	25	3	0	0	54
25. I am satisfied with the relationship developed between the SPC and school board	11	17	19	5	0	52
26. I am satisfied with the relationship developed between the SPC and the PAC	18	31	4	0	0	53
27. I am satisfied with the relationship developed between the SPC and school staff	22	22	6	2	1	53

Additional comments were offered by 11 respondents in Q28, of whom ten were PAC members and one a teacher. Many PAC comments dealt with information and training: *a lot more information should have been handed out; I don't have all of the information; better training sessions especially for the PAC members on the SPC; this has been difficult to cultivate as we have all been learning; as a parent and this being the first year for an SPC it was a bit confusing because of all the school information but it was a very good experience.* Others commented on teacher involvement - *I would be more satisfied with the relationship between the SPC and school staff if there was more than just one; SPC format excludes teacher involvement rendering them powerless to influence/shape school goals; staff have not demonstrated support for SPC.* One teacher wrote: *complete budget and staffing info not provided.*

Part III: Degree of Success in Fulfilling the Provincial Mandate

Statements 29 to 52 are divided into the following sub-categories: provincial mandate, satisfaction, impact, School Plan, consultation to the School Board, and progress. Statements 29 – 45 were responded to using a Likert scale of the following measures: *1 Strongly Agree (SA); 2 Agree (A); 3 Undecided (U); 4 Disagree (D); 5 Strongly Disagree (SD).* Questions 46, 48, 50, 51 require *Yes* or *No* responses, while questions 47, 49, and 52 require narrative comments. The last column of each figure represents the total number of respondents to the question.

Questions 29 and 30 refer to the provincial mandate under which School Planning Councils were formed. The responses are represented in Figure 4-12 below.

Figure 4-12 - Mandate

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
29. The SPC mandate, as defined by the Ministry of Education, is clearly understood	10	27	11	6	0	54
30. The SPC acts according to its mandate	16	31	7	1	0	55

Questions 31 and 32 (see Figure 4-13 below) refer to School Planning Council satisfaction levels.

Figure 4-13 - Satisfaction Levels

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
31. I am satisfied with the operation of the SPC	15	25	11	2	1	54
32. I am satisfied with the resources available to the SPC	11	20	16	3	5	55

Questions 33 to 35 refer to the impact that School Planning Council members feel they have made. These responses are provided in Figure 4-14.

Figure 4-14 - Impact

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
33. I feel that the SPC has begun to have an impact on student achievement	3	9	30	11	2	55
34. I feel that the SPC has begun to have an impact on the allocation of staff	1	3	25	16	7	55
35. I feel that the SPC has begun to have an impact on the allocation of resources	1	6	22	15	8	55

The development and submission of an annual School Plan is a significant area of responsibility for School Planning Councils. Perceptions regarding this aspect of the mandate are reflected in Figures 4-15 to 4-17 below.

Questions 36 to 46 examine the priorities, goals, and advice contained in the School Plan.

Figure 4-15 - School Plan Contents

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
36. The priorities of the school are reflected in the School Plan	28	21	2	0	0	51
37. The goals identified in the School Plan are specific	28	22	2	0	0	52
38. The goals identified in the School Plan are measurable	26	23	2	0	0	51
39. The goals identified in the School Plan are achievable	25	23	2	1	0	51
40. The goals identified in the School Plan are relevant	30	20	1	0	0	51
41. The goals identified in the School Plan are timely	27	22	3	0	0	50
42. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on student achievement	8	25	12	3	2	50
43. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on allocation of staff	2	7	19	16	7	51
44. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on the allocation of resources	2	8	19	13	8	50
45. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on educational programs	3	16	15	11	2	47

	Yes	No	TR
46. The School Plan also includes additional advice to the school board	2	37	39

Only one of the two respondents who answered in the affirmative to Q46 provided details and that response was related to *a shuffle of staff*.

Consultations with the school board regarding the School Plan were explored in question 48, with responses as illustrated in Figure 4-16.

Figure 4-16 - Consultations with the School Board on the School Plan

	Yes	No	TR
48. The SPC has been consulted by the school board to date	19	26	45

Twelve respondents replied to Question 49, *If yes to 48, how, and on what matters?* Of the 12, six principals stated it was *to present or review their plan* and in the case of one, *to present the process and goals*. Four PAC members cited presentations to or consultations with district staff or the school board. These discussions were described as *very constructive; specific for our goal; a good review process*. Two teachers responded as follows: *to verify goals*, and *the SPC serves a political function for the current gov't to appease & include parents. Educational needs are secondary, since as a professional, I spend 90% of our time "filling in the blanks" about curriculum, ministry requirements, etc. to parents.*

Questions 50 to 52 (See Figure 4-17) examined the capacity of the SPC to monitor and report on the progress of the School Plan.

Figure 4-17 - Monitoring the School Plan

	Yes	No	TR
50. The SPC has developed a plan to monitor progress of the School Plan	34	9	43
51. The SPC has developed a plan to report on the progress of the School Plan	36	13	49

Additional comments were provided by six of 57 respondents in Q52. Two PAC members felt there had not been time to monitor progress, another alluded to district-level assessments which might be used to assess progress. Three teachers wrote: *The SPC does not have the authority to influence the S.B. [School Board]; and will be done on the last PRO-D day (June 26); and not yet as many things are gradually developing.*

Part IV: Resources and Support

Statements 53 to 57 explored the perceptions of the resources available to SPC (see Figure 4-18 below). They were responded to using a Likert scale of the following measures: *Strongly Agree (SA)*; *2 Agree (A)*; *3 Undecided (U)*; *4 Disagree (D)*; *5 Strongly Disagree (SD)*. The last column of each figure (TR) represents the total number of respondents to the question of the 57 surveys returned.

Figure 4-18 - Adequacy of Resources

	SA	A	U	D	SD	TR
53. The SPC could benefit from further members	7	10	22	9	3	51
54. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to training and in-service	10	27	14	2	0	53
55. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to resources	20	23	9	2	0	54
56. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to communication	11	23	17	2	0	51
57. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to information gathering	14	21	13	3	1	52

Training

Sixty-three percent of respondents answered Q58, *What are the top three priorities for training and in-service?* Ten principals (of 12), 21 PAC members (of 35), and 5 (of 10) teachers responded. Their responses fell into several sub-categories: need, roles and responsibilities of members, understanding, communication, data collection, policy, planning, and other.

Two principals reflected on the need for in-service for new members and another suggested *release time for teachers*. Eight PAC members seemed concerned with receiving training and in-service. Their comments expressed the need for *more training and guidance from a provincial level, a more focused in-service part way through the term, annual training for new SPCs; staff workshops, providing PAC members the same training sessions and information as*

principal/teachers. They wanted more knowledge about which programs worked, how to present, and guidelines to go by. The one teacher comment favoured annual training.

One principal felt that training should relate to an awareness of roles and responsibilities. Six PAC members also indicated a need for clearer understanding of the role of the SPC and its members or of SPC rights in the school and district. Some thought these should be defined by the Chair, the members themselves, or alternatively by the school board. Teachers did not comment on this aspect.

Two principals indicated their priorities for training and in-service included *how to analyze data, how to relate resources to SIP, familiarization with assessment tools (district, FSA etc.), understanding of performance standards, and clarification of staffing and budget issues*. Six PAC members also saw increased knowledge as a priority. They desired more information on *data collection, bringing parent members “up to snuff”, enabling all members of the SPC to understand the purpose of creating goals, how to present, and guidelines (a template model)*. They wanted to be made *more aware of the influence SPC has on allocation of staff and resources, and which programs worked or not*.

Both principals and PAC representatives felt that communication was a priority for training and in-service with respect to each other and outside sources. Two principals cited the need for communicating *between staff and SPCs, district expectations, school and community needs*. Six PAC members desired better communication in the form of *information from the staff or guidelines from board to SPC members*. Two PAC respondents gave suggestions to improve communication: *have the Board liaison come to at least one SPC meeting, and have a Central contact (Head parent) for SPC members*.

Two principals and PAC members felt that data collection training was important to assist in collecting, analyzing and interpreting materials from a variety of sources. Principals see *data gathering, what data to look at, how to analyze data* as priorities. PAC comments reflected the comments of the principals.

Neither PAC members nor teachers commented on policy. Policy responses of principals fell into two sub-categories: those internally designed by the SPC to affect its operations and external mandates that directly influence the SPC. One principal wrote about training and in-service in relation to *developing policies and bylaws for SPC*. Others spoke of training in relation to *provincial mandates and district expectations*.

Planning was listed as a priority for training and in-service by principals. Four of ten principals thought *a better match between SPC planning cycle and current timelines and more lead time in advance of changes* were priorities. One principal suggested training on *reaching consensus* was a priority. Comments on behalf of PAC members for S58 included *teacher committees, school culture introduced as ongoing Pro-D theme, minutes from every meeting*. Three of five teachers listed the following priorities for training and in-service: *literacy, social responsibility, wish list from the staff, parents, and administration*.

Resources

Fifty-four percent of survey respondents (nine principals, 18 PAC members and four teachers) replied to Q59, *What are the top three priorities for resources?* Principals, PAC members, and teachers defined the term ‘resources’ in Q59 as both monetary and information. ‘Funding’ was referenced by four of the 9 principals, with three respondents referring specifically to release time for teachers and principals for: *meeting time, planning time, data collection, to meet goals*. Five

of 18 PAC members referred to funding specifically, as in *to implement programs, we need money*. One teacher specifically commented on *funding for in-service and materials*.

Communication between members and stakeholders was listed as priority resource. One principal commented that *communicating between staff and SPCs* was necessary. Three PAC members suggested conveying *what resources are available, involving staff, small focus groups with parents/teachers on annual targets*. Three teachers found communication through a variety of means to be a priority: *email connections for staff, discussion between other groups, [to] be connected and approved by staff and parents*.

Principals (3 of 9) recognized the importance of data collection and considered it as a priority resource: *data gathering mechanisms, teacher time to create and design assessment/data collection tools specific to our needs, professional development for staff & SPC around information gathering & interpretation*. Parents (6 of 18) referenced *survey results in all academic areas, other data collection resources to provide as many ways as possible to calculate measurable results with regards to the goals, administration needs assistance in gathering data, analyzing the data to determine that academic progress of students, information on educational services and programs in the school and reducing the manual process of data collection*.

Aside from data collection, resources were defined by SPC members as materials. Two principals cited *books to support goals, information about assessment, copies of performance standards*. Four PAC members saw the following materials as resources and commented on the need to share as priorities: *resources available within the school, resources need to be shared within the district, to provide information on educational services and programs in the school, access to info and successes of other SPCs, review of other school plans*. Two teachers indicated the need for *information about SPCs and school resources and funding for materials*.

Release time related to goals was seen as a high priority resource by principals and PAC members referred to the attainment of goals: *to help better implement strategies to achieve goals, to provide as many ways as possible to calculate measurable results with regards to the goals, and to provide as many ways as possible, opportunities and alterations for teachers to draw upon to try and ensure the success of the goals*. One PAC member commented: *There is no point setting goals if we do not have the resources necessary to implement the changes necessary to meet these goals*.

Other comments in relation to resources varied. Two principals cited *initiative and setting timelines*. PAC members (5 of 18) wrote: *principal, school growth binder, being available when needed, future meeting dates, visual messages around the school, posters to recognize achievement, materials for late literacy program, will they work, work fast enough, transferable to different grades or areas*.

Communication

Although respondents had commented previously on communication, 53 % of respondents of the survey responded to Q60, *What are the top three priorities for communication?* One principal (of 3) felt there needed to be *open lines of communication re: assessment, discipline*, while another felt that parents needed information to increase their understanding *about issues such as measurable outcomes*. This was reiterated in one teacher's comment: *an inordinate amount of SPC time has been taken at our meetings to "educate" parents about school processes, requirements, student needs*.

Establishing communication lines was a priority through vehicles such as *newsletters, small newsletter from each district - to give highlights of all groups, a website and email*. Seven PAC members (of 21) were concerned with communication as it relates to other SPC members and SPC stakeholders: *board involvement, discussions at staff and PAC meeting,; S.P.C. and students; an open door to the administration; feedback and buy-in from staff and parents; district level discussion/input; more info to parents about SPC; establishing contact with community resources*. One teacher (of 4) wrote *discussion with staff + and parents in school*.

Some respondents viewed communication as having direct influence on SPC meetings. One principal (of 6) found *we needed a non-council member to take notes/minutes so that voting members were able to concentrate wholly on discussion. Preparing agenda, calling meeting, preparing and posting minutes, reporting to PAC and staff add several layers of responsibility to already busy people*. Five PAC members (of 21) also commented on meeting minutes and their availability through prompt posting and distribution of minutes. *Setting dates for meetings* was seen as a priority by two PAC members. One PAC member felt that *the SPC should be kept up to date with revisions to by-laws* and several members mentioned *a communication budget for notices to parents or surveys*. One PAC member found *the communication of improvement goals* a priority.

Other interpretations of 'communication' resulted in the following responses: *to be open minded; good listening skills; and use communication effectively without duplicating other forms of communication*. One principal noted that teacher contracts restricted communication by *limiting staff meetings and meeting time*.

Information Gathering

Forty-nine percent of survey respondents replied to Q61, *What are the top three priorities for information gathering?* Responses to Q61 were closely related to Q59, *What are the top three priorities for resources?* The information collected would need to be *relevant, current, and measurable*. All three member groups surveyed saw receiving input as a priority, mentioning teachers, parents, support staff, the PAC and students. A principal stated that a priority would be *determining what information is relevant; determining what sources are specific to school needs; and determining how to interpret the information*. A PAC member wrote: *to determine if anything has been missed or an oversight*.

Information gathering could be accomplished in multiple ways: *via surveys that are consistent...to track meaningful results over time, input, feedback, focus-groups, follow-up to surveys to identify the true issues behind the statistics; classroom assessments; district assessments; statistics and assessment data; school growth binder; school tracking systems; exams; report cards; satisfaction results/surveys; prior research, community networking, and through interviews with teachers and support staff [all PAC suggestions] and from as many parties as possible including data collection at school base; provincial surveys and FSAs* as one principal suggested. The teacher suggested that *authentic data applicable to the goal be gathered*.

Continually collecting data to avoid much backlog would be necessary and would require funding for staff time and computer programs. Simple tools [would be a priority] for staff to gather data in an expedient manner. Another PAC member also saw the need for *manpower to retrieve information from teachers about student progress and getting info earlier*. One PAC member saw it *necessary to be visible in the school and access different groups within the school and create new committees as necessary*. Under S62, Additional comments, one PAC member wrote that *we relied heavily on our principal for info gathering*.

Twenty-six percent of survey respondents provided additional comments under Q62. At the time of the survey, one *SPC has only had one formal meeting where the school plan was approved, and the members elected wrote one principal*. Another principal respondent replied in the transition year it is difficult to answer the above questions. *I'm sure it will be clearer next year*. Five of 11 PAC members responded with similar comments: *We are still exploring the SPC's tasks and currently have only worked toward the SIP without giving above mentioned questions much thought; this being the 1st year (short at that), it has been a steep learning curve. It will be interesting to see the effect of SPC & SIP in the coming year; this is all very new and before making changes I think we need to go through a full cycle*. One teacher (of 2) agreed, *the process is so new that I had not thought about this much*.

Funding was again a concern voiced in S62 by PAC members: *no budget for SPC; outside resources with no money would be difficult; we need money from the government to effectively achieve the goals. We used to get money from accreditation and now this is replacing that process, without the money*.

Two PAC members did not feel they were able to respond to questions 58-61 for the following reasons: *these questions are more relevant to teachers and principals. As a PAC member I really don't have the information to answer and as a parent I do not feel qualified to comment*.

One teacher voiced an opinion in this section regarding the politics of SPCs: *I find little use in having [parents] vote on policies that they are largely ignorant about. I object to the government loading SPCs with 3 parents vs. 1 teacher, although it further illustrates the government's actual intention. Otherwise, people with experience and expertise [aka teachers] would be equally welcomed and represented*.

Achievements

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents provided answers to Q63, *List what you see as 3 successes of the SPC*. Involvement, especially by parents, is considered a success by all respondents. Five (of 10) principals see SPCs as another *opportunity for parent involvement in sharing information, planning, rapport building between staff and parents, and working with together on issues that are important to them*. Thirteen of 27 PAC members saw *parents more actively involved in the bigger picture or directly with the school plan; teachers and parents working more closely together for a common purpose to the welfare of the students; finding out what staff, parents & students want for their school; and informing the PAC of the process followed*. In the eyes of one PAC member this has provided a *more close-knit school community*.

Other successes mentioned by PAC members were: *developed an agreed upon plan of action; we have attained great feedback from teachers; including students, CUPE staff, guests; equal division of the 3 goals in order; and a completed Growth Plan*. Two of six teachers see *staff involvement in student learning improvement goals and input from lots of people with different perspectives* as successes.

Organizationally, respondents viewed a formed and functioning SPC in their school as a success. Some principals (6 of 10) see their SPCs as a *cohesive group with clear concrete goals, working with parents and staff on issues that are important to them*. Another principal felt that the SPC was *getting the job done with short timeline, limited instructions, and an existing schedule*. One principal viewed the SPC to be an *equitable distribution of input*. PAC members commented: *forming on such [short] notice; agreement to take turns sharing chair job; creating a school vision; having a teacher be a willing participant; the SPC team's enthusiasm to begin while uncertain about roles; and three parents committed to the SPC*. One teacher saw *dinner meetings* as a success.

The achievement of goals or striving to achieve them was a success in the eyes of SPC principals and PAC members. One principal felt that the SPC has *clarified its goals* while one PAC member commented on the fact that the *school has a goal that both students & parents agree on* while another indicated it is *accomplishing the goals*. The responding SPCs appear to be at different stages of goal attainment. Some PAC members (9 of 27) referred to *clear, measurable goals established; parents and teachers talking together towards same goal; striving for common goals* while others were *informing parents of goals of school; relevant goals for the school to attain were made; increasingly goals with specific implementation activities spread throughout the school year to allow change and new ideas to become embedded in practice*.

Understanding by PAC members of *school growth plans set by staff; of school planning and how goals are met; of the efforts that go into planning* was considered a success by respondents. One commented *we have learned a lot re: the system*.

Communication was another success noted by the three respondent groups. *Informing parents and PAC, obtaining feedback, achieving consensus* all lead to *draw[ing] on as many perspectives as possible to ensure the educational success of the children*.

Data collection was a success noted by PAC members: *collecting information regarding school goals; finding out what staff, parents & students want for their school; and to carry out research and report back*.

Accountability was also a noted success. Principals perceived the SPC as *a group that requires accountability*. PAC members cited *social responsibility accountability through targets; focus on responsibility and accountability for quality education; schools finding their academic weakness focusing, and being accountable for improving it*.

Sixty-one percent of survey respondents replied to Q64, *List what you see as 3 challenges within the SPC that were overcome*. Thirteen of 20 PAC respondents considered time the greatest challenge they had overcome. Time was defined by these respondents as *the logistics of organizing meeting times, tight timelines of the transition year, learning to work well together as a team, and it's the first time, so a lot to learn*. A challenge recognized by one principal was *the short timeline between training and the need to come up with a plan*. One of three teachers found *the scheduling of meetings as a challenge that was overcome*.

The formation and duties of the SPC were commented upon by principals (4 of 10): *forming the SPC; figuring out the job; making it a meaningful activity previously done by teaching staff; inclusion of staff; adapting to new information; adapting to format changes for S.I.P.* Four of 20 parents wrote: *not much clarity in the beginning. Much clearer now; understanding role of SPC; respectful consensus with teachers and parents; overcoming skepticism of a 'legislated body'*. One teacher (of 3) listed *knowing what is expected of the group*.

Challenges

Seventy-five percent of survey respondents replied to Q65, *List what you see as 3 challenges in the SPC that continue to need attention (list in order of needs attention)*. Ongoing challenges that concerned respondents were *meeting times, membership, training, resources, funding, involvement, roles, timelines, data collection, communication, goal achievement, and understanding*.

SPC membership (11 of 34 respondents) was most frequently listed as a challenge. Overall, it was considered that teachers are under-represented, with suggestions that two or more Council seats be allocated to teachers. Other comments on membership were to *ensure that SPC is truly a representative body, representation of senior students on SPC, and increased parental involvement*. Additional challenges in order of importance were funding for teacher release time,

data collection, training, communication, and time. There were two respondents each for training, resources, and increased understanding.

The depth of understanding of the education system required was listed as a challenge. Three (of 10) principals responded with *the desire for parent reps to speak for all parents & knowing the parents did not have adequate information; understanding the breadth and depth of the school plan and the planning process; to some degree - quickly introducing curriculum and instruction issues and concepts*. Six of 20 parents commented on understanding as well: *parents' lack of expertise re: the issues; seeing a direct connection between the data, strategies, and the students; undertaking each department's "language" when discussing their respective strategies; steep learning curve*.

A variety of other challenges were noted, including *differentiating between Accreditation and the SPC process; SIP goals imposed by District Office; don't have a right to tell teachers what to do or comment on allocation of staff and resources; and staying on topic*.

Twenty-three percent of respondents offered additional comments in Q66. Two principals wrote: *I find all of this politically-driven and for the most part, and all that is accomplished has been generally done before; and again, we need more time*. Four (of 12) PAC members underlined that this was the first year of operation for the SPC. Others wrote of *figuring out the most effective balance between the SPC setting out the goals of the school, without negatively balancing what the teachers set out to do to ensure the success of children; no issues within partner groups; things went smoothly as all partner groups were co-operative; and need a clear understanding of the strategy and purpose of the SPC legislation*. One comment reflected a misunderstanding of the independent funder of the survey detailed in the cover letter sent to all respondents: *With the lack of education dollars in our province why do we spend thousands on this luxurious paper and colored ink and mail it all over B.C.?* No teachers responded to this section.

The above findings will be interpreted in the chapter that follows and compared to the research from similar surveys in other provinces. Recommendations will follow this analysis of the data.

Chapter 5. Interpreting the Findings

The pilot survey of School Planning Councils administered during their first year has been advantageous in identifying a number of important themes. Although the survey sample was small, there was considerable agreement in the responses, suggesting that analysis of these preliminary findings can offer guidance for the future growth and development of SPCs in British Columbia.

It is important to note at the outset that 71% of survey respondents were satisfied with the formation and operation of their School Planning Council. Where completed, the preparation and submission of the School Plan was clearly an area of immense pride and satisfaction. Parental involvement was almost universally considered a success by all respondents. Other achievements and triumphs that were generalizable across groups included achieving a consensus on school goals, developing new understandings of the improvement planning process, the fostering of communication, and heightened sense of accountability. These are not insignificant accomplishments.

As might be expected in the first year, a number of challenges were also identified. Most prominently mentioned were operational issues related to communication, educating members, lack of funding for paid release time, lack of resources, SPC meeting times, distribution of agendas and minutes, a short time frame, and data collection. Some of these difficulties may be overcome with maturation, while new ones may be expected to emerge. Newfoundland's 1997-98 *School Council survey of Chairpersons* reflects the broad range of obstacles councils may experience:

*Other barriers mentioned included: restructuring; lack of cooperation from the school board, limited legislative power, lack of resources/funding [sic], lack of parental/community involvement, conflict with the principal about decision making, too much expected of the school council in the allotted time, lack of government and community support, lack of communication between school council and staff, and lack of council member commitment*³¹.

Synthesizing the Findings

In interpreting the findings of this survey, the themes of significance that emerged are those related to policy and regulation, roles and responsibilities, training, communication, data collection, and the preparation of school plans.

³¹Collins, A. (2000). The effectiveness of school councils: views of chairpersons. Retrieved November 16, 2002 from <http://www.Mun.Ca/Educ/Faculty/Mwatch/-Win2000/Collins.Html#Footnote>

Policy and Regulation

There are several policies that govern the School Planning Councils or are referred to by their members. The overarching policy for School Planning Councils is the provincial mandate. According to 37 of 54 respondents, the mandate is understood (10 strongly agree and 27 agree) and their SPCs act accordingly (16 strongly agree and 31 agree of 55 respondents).

This does not mean that respondents were in agreement with the size of the Council or the distribution of membership seats: one principal, three PAC members, and one teacher. Similar to councils in Ontario and the Yukon, there is only one teaching representative. A lack of teacher, staff, and student representation was an on-going challenge referred to in survey responses. Thirty percent of those surveyed felt they would benefit from further members, while 21% disagreed and 39% were undecided. While additional parents and teachers have been added to some Councils, as have vice-principals, support staff, students, administrators, and CUPE member(s), these are all non-voting members. Conflicting responses within the individual SPC regarding non-voting members suggest the term should be clarified in policy or by-laws.

Respondents felt the timeline was not a good fit for their operational mandate. This was reflected in comments concerning the amount of learning necessary for some members and the obstacles to completing and submitting School Plans by the end of the school year. The provincial assessment cycle did not permit current data such as the 2002-03 FSA results and the Grade 12 departmental exams to be available to the schools for analysis and incorporation into their School Plans.

Other policy directives such as the School Act and district level policy and regulations are referred to by SPC, with district documentation frequently consulted. Two PAC members write of the need to know what are the rights the SPC has within the school/district and of the desire for clear guidelines from board to SPC members.

The responding SPCs, aside from two, have not developed individual by-laws, even though nine districts have board policy items related to SPC on their websites. In other provinces, individual school council by-laws clearly outline voting procedures, roles and responsibilities, attendance, and minute-taking. Developing such by-laws would help respond to two PAC members' concerns, that the *Chair clearly define the roles and expectations* and that the *SPC members clearly define the roles and expectations*.

A consistent theme emerging from previous research (Giroux et.al., 1999; Collins, 2000; and others) and this survey is the lack of clarity within the enabling legislation, especially with respect to the relationship and balance of power and responsibilities between the SPC and the school board. For example, while the mandate for SPCs in British Columbia enables them to "provide advice to the board with respect to the allocation of staff and resources in the school", there is also a specific prohibition in the legislation regarding their involvement in personnel matters. In some provinces, the legislation specifically requires the involvement of school councils in the significant tasks of the selection and evaluation of the school principal. These and other questions concerning the degree of SPC decision-making authority may be anticipated as issues to be resolved in the future.

Political views were also expressed about the policies that created School Planning Councils. Writes one principal, *I find all of this politically driven* and one teacher, *the S.P.C. serves a political function for the current government to appease and include parents. Educational needs are secondary. As one PAC member pointed out, the School Planning Council is in need [off] a clear understanding of the strategy and purpose of the SPC legislation.*

Understanding Roles and Responsibilities

Figuring out the job of School Planning Councils would be of benefit. (B C principal).

Comments by principals and PAC member SPC respondents suggest that the mandate does not sufficiently clarify the roles and responsibilities of council members and this should be a priority in training and in-service even though respondents believed that the workshops were useful (39 of 49 respondents). The lack of clarity is consistent with early school councils elsewhere, such as Quebec, “[s]everal governing boards...had problems defining the role to be played by each of their members” (Giroux, Ouellet, Violette, & Garneau, 1999). Fifty percent of respondents to the Newfoundland and Labrador 1998 -1999 *Survey of School Council Chairpersons* concurred with the lack of definition, as did Ontario’s *The Road Ahead - III: A Report on the Role of School Councils* (Education Improvement Commission, 1998c).

This pilot survey suggests that members’ ability to fulfill their responsibilities is highly knowledge dependent. Survey comments reflected the challenges associated with parent members’ lack of familiarity with staffing and budget processes, curriculum and instruction, assessment tools, data analysis, and goal-setting. PAC members considered mastering the terminology and acronyms that are Ministry, district, and even curriculum specific terms represented the steepest learning curve for them and principals and teachers agreed. The 1999 survey of the Governing Boards by Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l’Éducation found similar gaps in understanding as did the Groupe d’analyse politique de l’éducation (GAPE), “The parents were more inclined to mention a lack of information or to say there were no problems” (Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l’Éducation, p.19).

Training

Most respondents were in agreement that training was a priority need. District workshops were attended by the majority (81%) of the School Planning Council members. While they agreed that the workshops were informative, explained the role of the SPCs, and their individual roles and responsibilities, this is somewhat contradictory to comments made in other parts of the survey. Sixty-five percent of respondents felt that they could benefit from further training or in-service, while a further 25% were undecided. One PAC member wrote: *we need more training and guidance from a provincial level*. Respondents indicated that further training might be done through focus groups and additional workshops throughout the year. This was in keeping with the findings of the 1999 survey of Governing Boards by the Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l’Éducation and the follow-up survey in 2002.

Although most governing boards took part in training activities they generally found worthwhile, they still had many questions and difficulties...For example, even though a parent participation organization was formed in close to two-thirds of schools, many governing boards were still unclear as to the role played by this organization and the ties they should maintain with it³².

³² Giroux, Lise, Ouellet, Michel, Violette, Michèle & Garneau, Martin. (1999). Analysis and report. Gouvernement Du Québec, Ministère De L’éducation, pp.47-48. Retrieved November 9, 2003 from http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca-publications-cons_etab_governing-.pdf

Communication

Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, (1997) identified communication as one of the six fundamental practices that contribute to effective community, school, and parental involvement. In its first operational year, Newfoundland and Labrador developed a committee to deal with communication. Nova Scotia's School Advisory Councils "...advise[ing] the principal and staff of the school on [among other things] parent-school communication and...advise[ing] the school board on communication strategies"³³ and New Brunswick's Parent School Support Committee advises principals on communication.

Communication takes many forms - from writing an agenda or taking minutes for a meeting, to networking at multiple levels, and writing a School Plan. Communication has been challenging for many survey respondents, who suggested forms of improving communication such as increased use of email, newsletters, and a website to keep parents and other stakeholders more up to date and involved in the SPC activities.

The writing and distribution of the agenda and minutes appeared to vary among SPCs. These are important to keep participants on track, gather information ahead of time, and for reference as a record for future meetings. Making the minutes available to the public also increases the public's awareness of the work and progress of the SPC. The writing and distribution of agendas and minutes were recommended by the 1998 Ontario's Education Improvement Commission's report, the Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation (1999) findings, and the most recent study by GAPE and CRIRES (2000). Sixty percent of SPC members feel the SPC could benefit from further communication support, citing the need for increased communication among themselves and with school staff and the district. Only 9% of the SPC respondents networked frequently or all of the time, 18% described their networking as satisfactory, whereas 54% felt that it occurred rarely or not at all.

Similar findings are reported in other school council research. Ontario's *The Road Ahead - III: A Report on the Role of School Councils* (Education Improvement Commission, 1998c), recommends that school councils "should take an active role in the communication of information, staying in contact with members of the community to ensure that they are well informed and that their input is requested, conveyed, and respected" (p.12).

Data Collection

Respondents to this survey see the importance of data collection, illustrated in their comments requesting *more surveys, information, further research, statistics and assessment data, school growth binders, school tracking systems, exams, report cards, and feedback*. In view of the tight timelines, respondents noted the need for quickly gaining the skills to collate and interpret this material. One solution offered by respondents was funding for a computer program or a paid position to collate and analyze essential data.

School Plans

A School Planning Council's purpose is to submit to their school board School Plans that look at the educational issues of their school. They must set goals based on data the SPC collects and analyzes from a variety of sources that will lead to increased student achievement in their school. Of those who had completed and submitted their first School Plans, many felt this to be one of the most positive aspects of their School Planning Council's work this year.

³³ Nova Scotia Ministry of Education. (1996). Education Act: Chapter 1 of the Acts of 1995-96, School Advisory Councils. Retrieved December 20, 2002 from <http://www.gov.-ns.ca/legi/legc/~sol.htm>

As School Plans have only recently been submitted, or were in the process of preparation at the time of this survey, it is too early to tell if they have had an impact on student achievement or the allocation of staff or resources. What is clear is that the SPCs feel confident the plans that they have completed reflect the priorities of the school and that the goals they contain are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely (SMART). It was also generally felt that the School Plans advise on student achievement. Respondents were less confident that they have provided advice to the school board regarding the allocation of staff (82% are undecided or disagree), resources (80% are undecided or disagree), or on educational programming (60% are undecided or disagree). This uncertainty may be attributed to inexperience and dissipate after another school year, or it may require clarity in the regulatory policy as to the exact nature of this advice. The provision of School Plan templates did not yet appear to be a widespread practice.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations flow from the early findings of the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003), many of which are consistent with the findings of school council surveys in other provinces. The following suggestions may be useful in supporting SPCs as they strive to achieve their mandate:

1. Expand communication networks for SPCs.

A multi-faceted approach is required to communicate effectively with the many parties involved and affected by the actions of the SPC. Stakeholder groups must be regularly informed and consulted, and internal communication among the immediate members of the School Planning Council and committee members plays a vital role in operating an effective council.

School Planning Councils need to inform their schools through a notice board for parents, students, and school staff members. This would alert people of meeting places, times, and activities of the council and keep them informed of committees that need volunteers or of areas in which the council is seeking help or advice. Automatic email lists of parents and staff would provide people with information directly and allow them to provide input to SPC members.

On a larger scale, a website that is school based but linked to the district would keep all members up-to-date on current activities, past issues, newsletters, research, data collection strategies, and policies. The website would be updated as action takes place and would also be a way of reaching a greater audience such as stakeholders, other councils across the province, and councils across Canada. This website could be linked to the British Columbia Ministry of Education. In turn, the Ministry could link this SPC website to other provincial Ministry websites or with such organizations as the Ontario School Council Support Centre.

School Plans should be made available on the website, enabling other councils with similar problems being addressed in their School Plans to communicate with one another. In this way, councils could see how effectively their goals are being reached, and strategies for dealing with obstacles encountered.

Discussion groups could also be set up as a way for stakeholders to provide active feedback. These could be responded to by out-of-province council members who may be able to guide SPCs through their own experiences. These offer a forum that provides invaluable practical advice and build networks amongst councils.

Networking with other SPCs is a form of information gathering. Advice may be sought, and suggestions for data collection, procedural shortcuts, training and in-service speakers, or even ways to run a meeting effectively can all be discussed through this form of communication. This strengthens partnerships.

A provincial networking organization similar to the Ontario School Council Support Centre and a mentoring programs with other Councils that have been in existence longer (for instance from other provinces) would provide a team approach to seeking advice and solving problems. An advantage to this networking would be to help establish policy.

2. Further develop regulatory policy as guidance for SPCs.

There are a number of areas where more detailed or amended regulatory policies would provide helpful support for School Planning Councils. Greater clarification of the responsibilities and authority of SPCs in relationship to the school board is needed to create a productive working relationship. The ideal relationship will provide for both site decision-making and strong alignment between school and district improvement goals.

The use of templates to provide a starting point for SPCs will help to alleviate the tensions of the “where to begin” syndrome. School Plan templates would provide some degree of content standardization, while allowing for modification to fit specific school needs. Where SPC by-laws already exist, these could be used as templates for others, simplifying the tedious development process for other councils. The posting of school board policies related to SPC in an easy to access manner, will permit other boards and their SPC who have not yet developed policy to see what has been addressed.

Some provinces, such as Ontario, have developed handbooks for their school councils. These guides could be adapted for SPC in British Columbia and would be an invaluable resource for existing and incoming SPC members and alleviate some of the need for in-service and training. Adopting a similar format as other provinces would permit the various handbooks to be easily compared for clarity of language and further guidance on topics of interest. Such guides would help ensure SPC are not diverted from their important primary functions to procedural and governance trivia, a danger clearly noted by Collins (2000).

Policy regulations must also address the need for a better match of data collection cycles, the availability of results, and the preparation of school improvement plans. The timeline for developing and presenting annual School Plans to school boards may need to be revisited if Plans are to be based on the most current and relevant data. Three or five-year plans would allow for the inclusion of longer-term goals that need to be reached, with the current year’s plan highlighted. Each subsequent year could then be revised in light of progress. However developing longer term plans requires an understanding of how to forecast, design, and implement these rolling plans. Training in this area would be necessary.

3. Provide increased training and In-service for SPCs.

Training and in-service has been a topic pinpointed by each group of respondents. Continued training throughout the school year is necessary to keep members apprised of new and current activities that exist within other SPCs, district, and Ministry developments. Increasing the knowledge of teacher language is on top of the list of training topics. This suggests that some in-service sessions could be administered that did not have to involve all parties of the SPC. One workshop that might be held without administrators or teachers and could offer intensive

familiarization with materials, language, as well as forms and other paperwork that would be necessary to understand as a parent member of the SPC.

For all SPC members, training needs to take place in the area of data collection and the interpretation of findings. Understanding the importance of provincial, district and school data and how the information directly affects the SPC is necessary. This could be done at district level workshops and those provided for individual SPCs. University Faculties of Education and the Ministry of Education (assessment and curriculum departments of both) could help in this area. All members will also benefit from on-going familiarization with the research around best practices for school councils to develop their capacity to engage in the school improvement planning process.

The significant investment in necessary on-going training required for SPC members will be maximized by lengthening the term of office. Two-year staggered terms would help ensure a balance of novice and experienced members each year on the council.

4. Systematize and support data collection.

The collection of school-wide data is a large and daunting task. With only five members per SPC, it is apparent from the findings of this survey that dealing with the compilation and interpretation of data has been a difficult task for the councils. Training in data literacy as described above would help in this area.

The manpower involved in collecting information is enormous. Many School Planning Councils may very well be collecting similar data. Networking with other councils and websites would help in this respect. Quebec has established sub-committees that deal with data collection (as well as other topics such as programming, governance, training workshops, and communication). Computerized programs that aid in data collection could be utilized in simplifying and standardizing this process. Once data is input, other districts could access the material. The data could be input as part of senior secondary computer classes or as training programs of Community College programs. Accessing graduate students and partnering with universities would also be a way of inputting data without taking away from SPC members' time.

The Ministry of Education should commission regular surveys of School Planning Councils in which all members participate. Having input from all members would benefit SPCs, allowing them to see their growth, be cognizant of varying member perspectives, realize common difficulties and successes, note the effect of resource levels on their operational effectiveness, and provide information and guidance on their effectiveness as a whole. This data would be shared and compared with inter-provincial school council research databases.

Conclusion

With the completion of their transitional year in British Columbia, some lessons have been learned about how School Planning Councils are developing and how they might be strengthened. This pilot survey serves as a baseline from which to chart their future progress. By acknowledging their significant work to date and noting the challenges yet to be overcome, the capacity of School Planning Councils to guide the improvement of student achievement in our schools will continue to grow.

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Appendix A



School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)



PART I BACKGROUND INFORMATION (Please check boxes to the right)						
1. Check the grades taught at your school?	K-5		6-8		9-12	
2. Check your position on the SPC	Principal		Teacher		PAC Member	
3. Check the SPC Chair	Principal		Teacher		PAC Member	
4. Explain how you selected your SPC Chair						
5. The SPC has non-voting members					Yes	No
6. If yes to 5, what type of non-voting members are there (teachers, students, parents)?						
7. The SPC has created and approved its own by-laws					Yes	No
8. At least one SPC training workshops was held in my district					Yes	No
9. I attended (an) SPC training workshop(s) . If no, proceed to # 13					Yes	No
10. The workshop(s) explained the purpose of SPCs					Yes	No
11. The workshop(s) were informative about school planning					Yes	No
12. The workshop(s) were informative about my position on the SPC					Yes	No
PART II DEVELOPMENT (Using the following scale, please check the statements below)						
1 All of the time 2 Frequently 3 Sometimes 4 Rarely 5 Never						
	1	2	3	4	5	
13. The SPC refers to the School Act for guidance						
14. The SPC refers to district level policy and regulations for guidance						
15. The SPC networks with other SPCs in the district						
16. The SPC makes meeting agendas available to the public						
17. The SPC makes meeting minutes available to the public						
18. Decisions are made by majority vote						
19. Decisions are made by consensus						
20. The SPC seeks advice from the school PAC						
21. The SPC seeks advice from the staff at the school						
22. The SPC seeks advice from provincial organizations						
(Using the following scale, please check the statements below)						
1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 3 Undecided 4 Disagree 5 Strongly Disagree						
	1	2	3	4	5	
23. The SPC is provided sufficient information to accomplish its goals						
24. I am satisfied with the relationships developed among the SPC members						
25. I am satisfied with the relationship developed between the SPC and school board						
26. I am satisfied with the relationship developed between the SPC and the PAC						
27. I am satisfied with the relationship developed between the SPC and school staff						
28. Additional comments:						

School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003): Continued

PART III DEGREE OF SUCCESS IN FULFILLING THE PROVINCIAL MANDATE					
(Using the following scale, please check the statements below)					
1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 3 Undecided 4 Disagree 5 Strongly Disagree					
	1	2	3	4	5
29. The SPC mandate, as defined by the Ministry of Education, is clearly understood					
30. The SPC acts according to its mandate					
31. I am satisfied with the operation of the SPC					
32. I am satisfied with the resources available to the SPC					
33. I feel that the SPC has begun to have an impact on student achievement					
34. I feel that the SPC has begun to have an impact on the allocation of staff					
35. I feel that the SPC has begun to have an impact on the allocation of resources					
(Using the following scale, please check the statements below)					
1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 3 Undecided 4 Disagree 5 Strongly Disagree					
	1	2	3	4	5
36. The priorities of the school are reflected in the School Plan					
37. The goals identified in the School Plan are specific					
38. The goals identified in the School Plan are measurable					
39. The goals identified in the School Plan are achievable					
40. The goals identified in the School Plan are relevant					
41. The goals identified in the School Plan are timely					
42. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on student achievement					
43. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on allocation of staff					
44. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on the allocation of resources					
45. The School Plan includes advice to the school board on educational programs					
46. The School Plan also includes additional advice to the school board			Yes	No	
47. If yes to 46, please describe briefly					
48. The SPC has been consulted by the school board to date			Yes	No	
49. If yes to 48, how, and on what matters?					
50. The SPC has developed a plan to monitor progress of the School Plan			Yes	No	
51. The SPC has developed a plan to report on the progress of the School Plan			Yes	No	
52. Additional comments:					
PART IV RESOURCES AND SUPPORT (Using the following scale, please check the statements below)					
1 Strongly Agree 2 Agree 3 Undecided 4 Disagree 5 Strongly Disagree					
	1	2	3	4	5
53. The SPC could benefit from further members					
54. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to training and in-service					
55. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to resources					
56. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to communication					
57. The SPC could benefit from further support with respect to information gathering					

School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003): Continued**PART IV RESOURCES AND SUPPORT (Continued, please respond below)**

58. What are the top three priorities for training and in-service?

- a.
- b.
- c.

59. What are the top three priorities for resources?

- a.
- b.
- c.

60. What are the top three priorities for communication?

- a.
- b.
- c.

61. What are the top three priorities for information gathering?

- a.
- b.
- c.

62. Additional comments:

PART V SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES (Please respond below)

63. List what you see as 3 successes of the SPC

- a.
- b.
- c.

64. List what you see as 3 challenges within the SPC that were overcome

- a.
- b.
- c.

65. List what you see as 3 challenges in the SPC that continue to need attention (list in order of needs attention)

- a.
- b.
- c.

66. Additional comments:

Appendix B



School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)



Wednesday, May 7, 2003

Dear Superintendent XXXX

As School Planning Councils are in the early stages of development, it is important to begin a collection of data related to their work. Your district has been selected to participate in a pilot survey in preparation for a province-wide survey of School Planning Councils one year from now. Participating districts will receive a copy of the pilot study report.

The research, based on similar surveys in other provinces, is commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education and funded by the Max Bell Foundation. The information gathered will benefit all Councils by illustrating their work to date, providing data related to the nature of their structures and processes, goals, involvement in School Plans, perceived needs, challenges, and degree of success in fulfilling the provincial mandate. The ensuing report will be made available to School Planning Councils, the SPC partner organizations - BCCPAC, BCTF, BCPVPA, BCSSA, BCSTA-school boards, superintendents, and the Ministry of Education.

Enclosed is a copy of the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003) along with instructions for its use. The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. We are requesting that all schools in your district complete the survey. We recognize that not all School Planning Councils are able to complete all sections of the survey at this stage, but would ask for completion to be as thorough as is possible. All information provided will be confidential and no individual or school will be identified in the analysis. Districts may be mentioned in the analysis. Individual consent to participate in the study will be evidenced by the completion and return of the survey to the address below.

We appreciate your participation in the success of this pilot by authorizing survey distribution on June 2, 2003 to your principals for SPC members. We are requesting that you email or fax your authorization (form attached) before Monday, May 26, 2003 for me to contact principals directly with this package. If you have any questions or would like more information, please email me at fgt@uvic.ca. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Frances G. Thorsen
Researcher,
School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)

Advisory Committee for the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003):
Dr. Yvonne Martin, Associate Dean of Education, University of Victoria
Hélène Cameron, Education Consultant
Ms. Patricia Williams, Consultant and former Assistant Superintendent,

Appendix C



School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)



Tuesday, June 2, 2003

Dear Principal

As School Planning Councils are in the early stages of establishment, it is important to begin a collection of data related to their development and work. Your district has been selected to participate in a *pilot* survey in preparation for a province-wide survey of School Planning Councils one year from now. Your superintendent has allowed us to distribute the *pilot* School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003) through you to *each* member of your school's School Planning Council (see Principal Instructions). Participating districts will receive a copy of the pilot study report.

We recognize that not all School Planning Councils are able to complete all sections of the survey but would ask for completion to be as thorough as is possible. The survey will take your members approximately 20 minutes to complete. All information provided will be confidential and no individual or school will be identified in the analysis. Districts may be mentioned in the analysis. Responding to the survey is voluntary. Consent to participate in the study will be evidenced by the completion and return of the survey to the address below.

The research, based on similar surveys in other provinces, is commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education and funded by the Max Bell Foundation. The information gathered will benefit all Councils by illustrating their work to date, providing data related to the nature of their structures and processes, goals, School Plans, perceived needs, challenges, and degree of success in fulfilling the provincial mandate. The ensuing report will be made available to School Planning Councils, the SPC partner organizations - BCCPAC, BCTF, BCPVPA, BCSSA, BCSTA-school boards, superintendents, and the Ministry of Education.

Enclosed is a copy of the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003) along with instructions for survey distribution and its use. Thank you for your assistance in ensuring all completed surveys are returned by Wednesday, June 18, 2003. Please collect and return completed surveys to "The School Planning Council Baseline Survey Project", c/o Frances Thorsen, 200 Frazier Road, Salt Spring Island, BC, V8K 2B5. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Frances G. Thorsen
Researcher
School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)

Advisory Committee for the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003):
Dr. Yvonne Martin, Associate Dean of Education, University of Victoria
Hélène Cameron, Education Consultant
Ms. Patricia Williams, Consultant and former Assistant Superintendent, Victoria, BC

Appendix D



School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)



June 2, 2003

Dear School Planning Council member,

Your superintendent has allowed us to distribute a pilot School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003) to *each* member of your School Planning Council through your principal. Responding to this pilot survey is voluntary and will assist us with a planned province-wide survey of councils next spring.

The survey will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete. All information provided will be confidential and no individual or school will be identified in the analysis. Districts may be mentioned in the analysis. Responding to the survey is voluntary. Consent to participate in the study will be evidenced by the completion and return of the survey to the address below. Participating districts will receive a copy of the pilot survey report to share with your council.

The research, based on similar surveys in other provinces, is commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education and funded by the Max Bell Foundation. The information gathered will benefit all Councils by illustrating their work to date, providing data related to the nature of their structures and processes, goals, School Plans, perceived needs, challenges, and degree of success in fulfilling the provincial mandate. The ensuing provincial baseline report will be made available to participating School Planning Councils, school boards, superintendents, the Ministry of Education and provincial education partner organizations.

To complete the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003):

1. Use a black or blue pen to complete the survey.
2. Do not name yourself or your school anywhere on the survey.
3. Follow each part's directions (i.e. check boxes or respond).
4. It is understood that all SPCs will not be able to respond to all items at this stage. Please answer all applicable questions; 'Additional Comments' are optional.
5. Return the completed survey to the Principal who will forward the surveys in one envelope to Frances Thorsen

Thank you in advance for filling out the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003).

Sincerely,

Frances G. Thorsen

Frances G. Thorsen
Researcher
School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003)

Advisory Committee for the School Planning Council Baseline Survey (2003):
Dr. Yvonne Martin, Associate Dean of Education, University of Victoria
Hélène Cameron, Education Consultant
Ms. Patricia Williams, Consultant and former Assistant Superintendent, Victoria, BC

Appendix E

Date: June 1, 2003

Subject: School Planning Councils Request

Dear Superintendent:

School Districts are at varying stages of implementing School Planning Councils. Surveys entitled the pilot Baseline Survey on School Planning Councils were administered to some districts this Spring. Your input as Superintendent is important to contribute to the data of the activities of the Councils to date. I would appreciate it if you would take a few minutes and respond to the questions below. This may be done as a reply to this email.

The pilot survey was commissioned by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education and funded by the Max Bell Foundation.

Please respond by Wednesday, July 9, 2003.

Thank you in advance.

Frances Thorsen

Intern Researcher for pilot Baseline Survey on School Planning Councils

1. How many schools in your district have established an SPC? (out of total # of schools).
2. How many SPCs reported to their Board regarding their School Plan? (written or oral?)
3. Has your district developed and provided SPCs with a template for this report?
4. Do you feel that the SPCs in your district have grasped and successfully accomplished what they have been mandated to do?
5. What is your opinion on the overall successes of the first year of implementation of the SPCs?
6. What is your opinion on the overall challenges of the first year of implementation of the SPCs?
7. How would you describe the quality of the planning processes and products?
8. What other measures of success are used by your district?
9. What would be a good time of year to mail out a survey on School Planning Councils to your district for the 2003/2004 school year?