A Survey of

Alberta School Councils

Realities, Perspectives and Challenges

September 2008

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF Excellence in Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School councils were established in Alberta in 1995 as a means for parents and community members to have a meaningful advisory role in educational decision making. Councils consist of parents, school principals, teachers, and senior students and can involve members of the wider school community. They work to promote the well-being and effectiveness of schools. In July 2007, Alberta Education revised the regulation governing school councils in the province placing a greater emphasis on their role as advisors to principals and school boards on issues related to student achievement and school improvement.

The Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) is the provincial organization that works to support effective school councils through the provision of training and materials, advice and advocacy. Alberta Education began a 4-year pilot in 2004 to provide training and development to school councils across the province. The School Council Development Project (SCD) was operated through the ASCA and has now become an integral part of their operations.

In January of 2008, the ASCA contracted the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE) to conduct a provincial survey of school council chairs and members, principals, superintendents and school board chairs. This report contains the findings and analysis of that research which aimed to:

a) Quantify stakeholder perceptions regarding the operations and effectiveness of school councils

b) Assist ASCA in evaluating the impact of the SCD project

c) Document the evolving nature of the influence of school councils at the school and jurisdictional level with respect to advising on educational planning

d) Provide a baseline against which further changes can be tracked

Methodology

Two separate surveys were administered during April-May 2008. One invited responses from school council chairs, members and principals with an extended section for school principals to capture input on their leadership role. The second shorter survey was administered to school board chairs and superintendents to gather input from the jurisdictional level. SAEE convened a provincial advisory committee to assist with survey development and review of the final report and was assisted by a professional survey firm to conduct the data gathering. Surveys were administered on-line, and by telephone with paper versions available to superintendents and board chairs. For the superintendent/board chair survey the margin of error at a confidence interval of 95% is ±6.8 percentage points for superintendents and ±6.0 percentage points for chairpersons. For the survey of principals, school council chairs and members the margins of error at a 95% confidence interval are: ±2.2 percentage points for principals, ±3.7 for chairs and ±6.4 percentage points for other council members.

Data from both school and jurisdictional level surveys were combined for the analysis and are reported under the following themes:

- Governance and operating procedures

- Education/School improvement planning

- Communication outreach and membership

- Training and development

- Resources, support and networking

- Success and challenges

The findings point to some significant differences in perspectives among the five specific groups surveyed.

Selected Findings

Governance and Operating Procedures

School councils are guided by provincial legislation and regulation and jurisdictional policy. Operating procedures inform the school council in the manner in which to conduct business. According to ASCA, procedures should be aligned with government legislation and local school board policy, but are developed by the school councils themselves and may include such things as a code of ethics, procedures for dealing with conflict, duties of officers, etc. (Alberta School Council Resource Manual, p. 5).

According to survey findings, principals, members and chairs refer to school and jurisdictional policy more frequently than provincial legislation for guidance. More than 80% of principals, council chairs and members strongly or somewhat agree that they have a clear understanding of what the council is expected to accomplish and have a working knowledge of council by-laws and operating procedures. However, fewer council chairs and members agreed that they have a clear understanding of the legislation governing school councils. In response to that statement, 95% of principals, 79% of council chairs, and 67% of members agreed, but with the majority indicating "somewhat" rather than "strongly" so.

More than 95% of superintendents and board chairs somewhat or strongly agree that school councils in their jurisdictions have access to information and documents required to do their work. The majority of council chairs, members and principals also perceive the explanation of student achievement data to the council to be satisfactory with principals, indicating slightly higher levels of agreement to this aspect than chairs and members. More than 90% of principals, school council members and chairs indicate that they feel confident in their ability to run effective meetings, and work in a collaborative group.

Principals report that they spend approximately 9% of their time on average working with school councils. In an open ended question, principals, council chairs and members report the same three areas on which the council spends the largest percentage of time. The type of activity is emphasized differently depending on the respondent group. Among principals, 32% of principals believe that the majority of their time is spent on receiving advice from the council. School council chairs most commonly mentioned consulting and reporting with parents and the community (30%) as the aspect of work that occupies the majority of their time and school council members indicate fundraising as the area of greatest time emphasis (27%).

School Improvement Planning

School councils have three main avenues for participation in school improvement planning. They may provide advice in the development of the jurisdiction's Three Year Plan and Results Report; provide advice on the school's Three Year Plan and Results Report; and create their own Three Year Plan to align with that of the school.

Approximately eight in ten superintendents and school board chairs believe that school councils have the opportunity to be involved in educational planning at the jurisdictional level through the jurisdiction's Three Year Plan. In rating their effectiveness at playing a meaningful role in district improvement processes, 75% of superintendents and 79% of board chairs view councils as somewhat (51% chairperson, 49% superintendent) or very (28% chairperson, 27% superintendent) effective in this capacity.

This can be compared to the 40% of school council members, 52% of council chairs and 61% of principals who reported that they are somewhat or very effective in playing a meaningful role in jurisdictional planning. Fewer than 15% of members and chairs and approximately 16% of principals selected "very effective" to describe this aspect of their work.

Approximately 54% of council members, 60% of council chairs and 80% of principals indicated that they were involved in an advisory role the school's Three Year Plan and Annual Results Report. Fifteen percent of members and chairs and approximately 21% of principals chose "very effective" (the highest rating) to characterize the councils work in influencing priorities for student achievement at the school, with the majority choosing "somewhat effective".

At the jurisdictional level, school board chairs and superintendents rated the school council's ability to influence priorities for improving student achievement at the school. Among chairpersons, 19% view councils as very effective (57.4% somewhat effective); similarly, 13.3% of superintendents rate them as very effective (62.2% somewhat effective).

Just over 30% of principals believe the school council is very effective in supporting educational achievement and approximately half believe it is somewhat effective, whereas 15.4% indicate that it is not very or not at all effective.

Fewer than one quarter of principals, council chairs and members indicated that their council had developed its own Three Year Plan to support that of the school.

Goals and Priorities

Gathering information on council goals and priorities provides insight into areas of work on which councils are placing emphasis and aspects which are perceived to be most valuable. Council members, chairs and principals were asked to indicate their top three priorities for the year in an open-ended question.

Despite changes to legislation placing a greater emphasis on the council's role in advising on educational planning, nearly half of school council chairs and members are more likely to mention fundraising activities as one of their top priorities. Principals, on the other hand, indicate their goals for the council revolve around student achievement and educational planning.

Communication Outreach and Membership

School councils appear to be very successful in communicating with the wider school community with nearly 90% of principals, members and school council chairs indicating that this is done regularly through a variety of methods including meetings, newsletters, websites, email and other similar methods. School goals and priorities are the most common issues communicated, followed by school programs and student achievement issues.

Multiple stakeholder meetings and Council of School Councils meetings are the most common avenues for networking at the jurisdictional level according to superintendents and board chairs.

More than 80% of principals, school council chairs and members somewhat or strongly agree that the council uses formal communication tools to keep all participants informed. Ratings for effective conflict resolution measures are also fairly high with slightly fewer members strongly agreeing with this.

Training and Development

Training and resources for school councils are available through the Alberta School Councils' Association's Development Program which provides workshops and resource materials to assist all school councils in the province.

Survey findings indicate that 53% of board chairs and 76% of superintendents have sought support from ASCA in the past three years, predominantly through accessing training workshops and resource material for their jurisdictions. Approximately one in five principals and school council chairs have participated in training during the past three years and 60% of principals say that they have opportunity to acquire training to work effectively with their school councils.

Workshops provided through ASCA cover the following topics:
- Roles and Responsibilities of School Councils
- Recruiting and Retaining School Council Members
- School Councils and Planning
- School Councils and Fundraising Societies: Important Similarities and Differences

Workshops were rated as being quite effective by the majority of principals, chairs and members. However the workshop on school improvement planning received a slightly lower rating of effectiveness especially from school council chairs, with 36% rating it as very effective and 34% somewhat effective.

All groups were asked to indicate whether they felt that the training for school councils was sufficient. The majority of superintendents (85%) and school board chairs (77%) agree school councils have access to sufficient training. At the school level, 78% of principals, 68% of council chairs and 55% of members perceive the level of training as sufficient to develop the skills necessary to meet their mandate.

The top training priorities for principals, council chairs and members, relate to challenges experienced with recruitment and retention of council membership, roles and responsibilities and long-term planning.

Resources

More than 80% of superintendents and board chairs report that councils have access to adequate resources; however, fewer than 80% of council members, chairs and principals feel they have adequate access specifically to funding or sufficient members to carry out their work.

The most valued resource for school councils is experienced members as mentioned most frequently by close to half of principals, council chairs and members surveyed.

Additional support in communicating with staff and administration was articulated as a need by council members and chairs. Principals indicated that they would like to see greater access to workshops and training for members.

More than 80% of principals rate the Alberta School Council Resource Manual (ASCRM) as being very or somewhat useful to them when working with councils. A total of 93% of superintendents and 79% of board chairs rate the manual as very or somewhat useful.

Success and Challenges

School council chairs, members and principals rated their top three accomplishments of the previous year. For council members, fundraising was listed most frequently (55% of members). For principals and school council chairs, developing school programs and supporting student achievement was the most frequently mentioned accomplishment (58% of principals 55% of chairs) followed by fundraising activities.

Challenges that councils have overcome in the past year, and the largest challenge that councils continue to face, relate to recruiting and retaining sufficient membership as this was mentioned most frequently by all three groups. The second most pressing challenge is increasing parent involvement in the school.

Discussion and Observations

Stakeholder perceptions of school council operations and effectiveness provide much food for thought. Where superintendents and board chairs at the jurisdictional level provide responses which are quite positive in the majority of aspects of council operation, training and effectiveness, councils indicate that they are grappling with the demands of membership recruitment, ensuring representation, transitioning to a more involved advisory role in education planning and forming positive working relationships among the council membership and its community partners.

This section of the report provides analysis of the survey findings and makes links between the survey results and wider research on school councils specifically in the areas of:

- Consulting with the school community

- Relationship with the principal

- School improvement planning

- Training and development

- Recruiting members

- Council effectiveness

- Fundraising

Some of the key areas of council operation and the differing perspectives of stakeholders are noted in this section and summarized below.

- There is a significant discrepancy identified in this analysis between the views of principals compared to council chairs and members regarding a more active and meaningful involvement in educational planning. Principals are roughly twice as likely to report council involvement in "consultations during the development of the plan" or in "providing feedback on the plan" as are school council chairs and members.

- There are also conflicting views on whether councils have access to sufficient training to develop the necessary skills to do their work. The large majority of superintendents, board chairs and, to a somewhat lesser degree, principals believe this is so, while many council members (45%) and chairs (32%) disagree.

- Only 21% of principals, 16% of council chairs, and 15% of council members perceived their councils as "very effective" in their ability to influence school priorities for improving student achievement.

- It is apparent that many Alberta school councils maintain a prominent focus on fundraising, despite their mandate to provide advice on school improvement.

- Recruiting a sufficient number of council members remains a widespread challenge.

- Council effectiveness in building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders is rated most highly by all five sets of respondents. More than 70% of

principals rated their councils as being 'very effective' on this indicator, followed in descending order by council chairs (60%), members (54%), jurisdiction chairs (51%) and superintendents (42%). Clearly, this is perceived as a strength of Alberta school councils.

• The results from the 2008 survey provide evidence that Alberta school councils are successfully fulfilling their mandate to consult widely with the school community on educational matters. Approximately 90% of principals, council chairs and members responded positively to the question: Does your council seek advice from the school community?

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this baseline survey, a number of recommendations are offered to strengthen the capacity of school councils as they move forward in fulfilling their mandate.

1   Create opportunities for meaningful involvement in educational planning.

2   Strengthen communication between principals and councils.

3   Provide explicit training in new roles and areas of need.

4   Increase council impact at the jurisdiction level.

5   Address the challenge of council membership.

6   Expand communication and network building among councils.

Additional research could be beneficial in a number of specific areas such as these and others to help identify best practices:

• For future monitoring of training programs going forward, it would be useful to track whether those councils whose members receive systematic training begin to allocate a greater degree of their time to different functions.

• A series of in-depth case studies of school councils in a variety of settings could yield insights regarding their practical inner-workings and promote broader understandings of effective practices and conditions of success. These case studies and the lessons learned could be shared on the ASCA website as part of the School Council Development program.

• The impact of aligned three-year plans on school council effectiveness should be studied in considering whether this practice should be more widely encouraged.

Finally, it will be useful to repeat the 2008 surveys after an appropriate interval of two to four years in order to determine changes from this baseline data. Systematic ongoing monitoring is essential to quantify the continuing progress of councils towards their evolving mandate as partners in the education system.