Alberta School Councils' Association

Parents' Voice in Public Education

Alberta School Councils Survey 2008

Realities, Perspectives and Challenges

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF Excellence in Education

Alberta
School Councils' Association
ASCA

Parents' Voice
in Public Education

A Survey of

Alberta School Councils

2008

Realities, Perspectives and Challenges

September 2008

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF Excellence in Education

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT ASCA

This report was commissioned by the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA). The ASCA was established in 1929 to promote positive connections between home and school. Over the years, the Association's mandate has evolved to meet the needs of parents in a changing public education milieu. Today, governed by a volunteer Board of Directors comprised of parents from school councils across the province, the ASCA works with education partner organizations and Alberta Education to assist school councils with demonstrating their legislated mandate.

The ASCA, a non-profit organization provincially recognized as "the voice of parents in public education", supports effective school councils through training, materials, advice and advocacy. With a voluntary membership of approximately 700 school councils, the organization remains committed to the goal of an effective school council in every Alberta school. Visit the Alberta School Councils' Association website, www.albertaschoolcouncils.ca for more information.

ABOUT SAEE

This report was prepared for the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE), a non-profit education research agency founded in 1996. The Society's mission is to support excellence in public education through the provision of research to guide policy and practice. To that end, SAEE has undertaken educational research and evaluation in every Canadian province and territory, producing more than 40 commissioned reports which can be found at its website, www.saee.ca. The principal authors of this report on behalf of SAEE are Kirsten Bennett, M.Ed., Research Manager and Helen Raham, Research Director.

FOREWORD

Imagine a group of aware, knowledgeable and involved parents – those who are genuinely and meaningfully engaged in advising principals and school boards on educational matters. Imagine these parents making positive contributions to education at the local and jurisdiction levels, working as supportive partners in school improvement planning. Imagine parents, principals, school trustees and superintendents with a common vision for student success, working together to make their vision a reality.

Now…imagine this group existing in every school and jurisdiction in Alberta, and the tremendous potential for cooperation, partnership, improvement and excellence – for students and their learning opportunities.

That picture is the 'vision' of the Alberta School Councils' Association. This survey and its conclusions highlight the many opportunities that exist, and upon which we can build, to assist school councils in "living their role". Further improvements to ASCA services and supports to school councils will be guided by this report, and help us move closer to making the vision of "an effective school council in every school" Alberta's reality.

Michele Mulder
Executive Director
Alberta School Councils' Association

Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

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.

1 Introduction

School councils represent an important partnership among parents, teachers, secondary students, principals, and community representative(s) to support and enhance student learning in Alberta's schools. They were established in 1995 under the *School Act* as a vehicle for parents and community members to have a meaningful advisory role in educational decision making. This report presents an overview of their progress towards this mandate, based on data from provincial surveys conducted in the spring of 2008.

THE CONTEXT FOR SCHOOL COUNCILS

Under the legislation which created school councils, all schools in Alberta's public education system, including charter schools, must provide the opportunity for the formation of a school council. Its membership must consist of parents of children at the school, the principal, a teacher, and a student representative if in a high school. Parents make up the majority of members, and assume the leadership position of school council chair.

Many of Alberta's school councils evolved from and have replaced Parent Advisory Councils (PACS) which were volunteer parent groups primarily focused on supporting the school through fundraising. School councils, on the other hand, are designed to provide a formal mechanism for parents and the school community to work together with administration to promote the well-being and effectiveness of the school and support student achievement. They represent a place for dialogue and a more meaningful advisory role for parents in school-based decision making.

School councils may advise and consult with principals and school boards on a variety of issues and influence decision making at the school or jurisdictional level. They assume an advisory role in education matters that range from programs to school policies and budgeting. Alberta Education's *School-based Decision-making Policy* (Revised 2007) makes explicit the requirement for principals to "work with parents, teachers and members of the community to develop school policies and budgets as well as to establish the scope of the school program and extracurricular activities" (Alberta School Council Resource Manual (ASCRM), Revised 2007, p. ii).

The decision-making authority of a school council extends to:
- Developing policies at the school level described in the *School Act*
- Planning support activities that align with the school council's purpose
- Choosing what advice to provide the principal and board on relevant topics (ASCRM, 2007, p. 40).

In July, 2007 Alberta Education revised the regulation governing school councils which articulated their work should have greater focus on student achievement and school improvement. School councils are to be provided opportunities to access and receive an interpretation of student achievement data in order to inform decisions in relation to educational issues. Other changes

outline the responsibility of school boards to provide opportunities for school councils to offer advice on a number of issues at both the school and jurisdictional level.

Council Members and Their Roles

The school council chair, often a parent with some experience on the council, is responsible for the coordination of meetings, organization and leadership, and ensuring regular ongoing communication with members, school administration and the wider community.

The principal plays a pivotal role on the council, promoting collaboration and empowering council operations in the school. The principal is responsible for interpreting and sharing results of student achievement with council members and also acts to refer members to the appropriate resources and training activities to support the council's work in advising on the school's Three Year Education Plan.

The teacher's role on the school council is to represent the teachers' perspective and lend professional knowledge and expertise. Teachers encourage parents and community members to become involved in school activities and relay activities of the school council to other staff.

In high schools, one (or more) student(s) represents his or her peers on the school council and is responsible for providing input on decisions and communicating council activities to the student population at large.

Although not mandatory, community representatives may be elected to a school council. These external members may add value to a council by providing the perspectives of the broader community and facilitating partnerships between the school and external agencies which can serve to enhance student learning.

At the jurisdiction level, superintendents and school boards are required to support the role and operation of school councils. As the chief executive and educational officer, the superintendent establishes accountability measures, upholds the *School Act, School Councils Regulations* and related policies, and supports council formation and operations. School/charter board members provide school councils with regular opportunities to offer advice on the school's mission, vision, philosophy, policies, education plans, results and budget. They are also important providers of resources and information on assessment results and governing policy.

School Council Activities

School councils carry out their work through a variety of activities which fall into three main areas:

Education/School Improvement Planning

The province of Alberta has mandated three-year education planning and results reporting for school boards and schools. Three Year Plans at the school level are designed by school administrators and staff in consultation with school councils and are expected to align with both jurisdictional and provincial direction (ASCRM, p. 30). School Councils have the opportunity to participate by providing advice on the development of both the jurisdiction's and school's Three Year Education Plans and Results Reports. To increase meaningful involvement, school councils sometimes consider developing a complementary three-year school council plan which outlines

the strategies the council intends to pursue to support the achievement outcomes in the school's plan.

At the end of each year, schools must prepare an Education Results Report which is then used to prepare the jurisdiction's Annual Education Results Report (AERR) for Alberta Education (ASCRM, p. 30).

Communication

School councils represent parents and members of the broader school community. As such, ensuring meaningful communication among all parties is an important role that councils play. Questionnaires, informal discussions, and meetings are some of the methods used to take the pulse of parents and community members, whose views may be reflected by the council in advice given to principals and staff on school operations. School councils also provide an important service in communicating school activities to the wider community and encouraging greater involvement by parents.

Fundraising

Fundraising is not expected of school councils in their current role. However, due to the history of councils transitioning from PACs which were heavily engaged in fundraising, there has been some continued emphasis on this aspect of work on many school councils. Tensions exist between the desire to provide enhanced resources to support schools and the shift to advising on school operations and improvement planning. It is encouraged by the ASCA that school councils decide to what extent they will be involved in fundraising and what other aspects of their work are likely to be enhanced or compromised by efforts placed in this area (ASCRM). Separate fundraising societies can be valuable partners in school and program resource development and can work in partnership with school council goals.

Resources and Support

Local support from the school jurisdiction for the operation of school councils includes but is not limited to:

- the purchase of membership for all jurisdiction school councils in the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA), (see below);
- resources to enable school council representatives to attend the ASCA annual conference and general meeting;
- resources to assist individual school councils with their operations;
- support for school council parents' attendance in jurisdiction professional development days and other knowledge and skill development events and sessions;

Additionally, many jurisdictions have also established a school council umbrella organization at the jurisdiction level, oftentimes called a Council of School Councils (COSC). Where it exists, such a structure provides a network for school councils to exchange information regarding their activities, participate in joint training, or communicate with school board members and the superintendent regarding educational plans for the jurisdiction.

The provincial organization representing school councils is the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA),[1] which supports the formation and development of effective school councils. ASCA membership stands at 681 school councils as of June 2008, representing a steady increase in membership since 2004/05 (459 councils). The provincial association presents a collective "parents in public education" perspective in discussions of educational issues at the provincial level as well as to school boards and other groups in the public education milieu. The ASCA is the government recognized body through which councils may advise on matters pertaining to provincial educational policy. This is accomplished through resolutions brought forward by its membership at annual general meetings. Resolutions endorsed or approved by the majority of delegates become policy and form the basis for advocating change to the Ministry of Education and others (ASCRM, p. 12).

The Alberta School Councils' Association supports councils across the province through providing resources such as the *Alberta School Council Resource Manual* (revised 2007), and partnering with the province to make school council training available. In 2004, Alberta Education provided funding to ASCA in addition to the operating grant to support school council development. Subsequently in 2007, in part due to the success of the school council development program, continued funding for the initiative was incorporated into a new operating grant that will extend through to 2010.

School Council Training

In 1999, after broad consultation, the Minister's Forums on School Councils M.L.A. Working Group tabled its findings on the effectiveness of school councils during the first years of operation after the legislation came into effect. This report included recommendations, some of which dealt with the need for training to enhance school council effectiveness and promote meaningful parental involvement at local and jurisdiction levels. It concluded with the recommendation that school council effectiveness should be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

In answer to Recommendation 2.3 of the report regarding the need for training and development, the School Council Development Project (SCD), a four-year pilot funded by Alberta Education, was initiated in 2004. The Alberta School Councils' Association assumed responsibility for the project, and with the input and support of the major education stakeholders[2], developed workshops, created a volunteer facilitator training program for workshop delivery, produced a new school council resource manual (ASCRM), and enhanced a toll-free "advice and tip" phone service for assisting school councils. Alberta Education dedicated a total of $780,000.00 to the SCD project.

The School Council Development (SCD) workshops offered at no charge cover four primary topics:
- Role and responsibilities of the school council
- Recruiting and retaining council members
- Educational planning
- Distinguishing between school councils and fundraising societies

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[1] www.albertaschoolcouncils.ca
[2] Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta Teachers Association, Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, College of Alberta School Superintendents and Alberta's Regional Professional Development Consortia.

During the three-year period between 2005 and 2008, a total of 267 workshops were delivered across the province directly to school councils, both to ASCA members and non-members, with a total of 3,532 participants in these training sessions. In addition to these training workshops, the ASCA delivered another 60 further presentations related to the work of school councils involving 750 participants in 2007/08. Statistics are not available for 2005/06 and 2006/07.

School Council Evaluation

In 2004, the province commissioned a review of the effectiveness of school councils which was conducted through a series of 11 focus groups with school council members and 28 interviews with principals and trustees across the province. These consultations revealed markedly different levels of development and degrees of understanding of the role of school councils as well as different approaches and capacities to accomplish work among the nearly 40 school councils examined (Kaleidoscope, 2004, p. 7). Where some councils maintained consistent membership, advised on policy decisions, and played a role in educational planning, others were struggling to recruit members, reacting to needs on a month to month basis, and unable to develop strong working relationships with principals and school trustees. At the time of the report, many school council members and administrators continued to perceive the primary role of the school council as a fund-raising mechanism. This was seen as a limitation to the ability of school councils to move into their role as advisors on matters pertaining to educational progress (p.9). School council members reported challenges in recruiting and retaining members, having adequate opportunity to advise principals on decisions affecting the school, remaining focused on the needs of the entire school, finding effective means for communication, and managing the degree of time required of parent volunteers.

The characteristics of effective school councils derived from the research are outlined in Table 1.1 and these continue to guide school council training and development.

Table 1.1 Characteristics of Effective School Councils

Characteristic	Description
Purpose	• Have an appropriate focus (e.g., enhancing student learning by contributing to the positive school environment) • Have clearly defined achievable goals (e.g., advising principals and board on matters the council considers important)
Membership	• Representative of the entire school community including those specified in legislation and regulation • Have inclusive membership recruitment processes
Roles Responsibility and Relationships	• Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities • Establish constructive relationships with principals and board • Carry out activities that further the purposes specified in legislation and regulation • Provide input to principals and board on important matters, e.g., school and jurisdictional plans, budgets, programs, policies, facility use, results • Respect the roles and responsibilities of, and cooperate with others such as teachers, principals, jurisdiction administrators and other parent organizations
Communication	• Promote the council's purpose, activities, and results with parents and the larger school community • Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents • Seek input from parents and the school community • Receive feedback an advice provided

Adapted from: *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary of Findings of the Provincial Consultation* (2004) Kaleidoscope.

In other evaluations, Alberta Education annually surveys parents of ECS to Grade 12 students to determine parent involvement and satisfaction with decision-making and their school council. The ASCA tracks satisfaction with School Council Development workshops and evaluates all programs and other supports accessed by councils. That being said, there has not been comprehensive research undertaken to determine the effectiveness of school councils and their relation to student achievement and school improvement. In keeping with the recommendation of the 1999 report regarding ongoing evaluation and in light of recent legislation (2007) designed to focus the work of school councils on student achievement, the collection of more comprehensive data was deemed valuable to measure progress towards this goal.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In January 2008, the ASCA contracted the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE) to undertake a provincial survey of school council chairs, members, principals, school superintendents and school board chairs. This research was undertaken with four broad purposes in mind:
- to quantify stakeholder perceptions regarding the operations and effectiveness of school councils;
- to assist ASCA in evaluating the impact of the SCD project
- to document the evolving nature of the influence of school councils at the school and jurisdiction level with respect to improving student achievement; and,
- to provide a baseline against which further changes can be tracked.

The combined results were intended to yield valuable data on perceptions of council operations, organizational structure, working relationships, communication and outreach, training and resources, as well as significant successes and challenges. It would also attempt to quantify the nature of school council activities and perceived contribution to educational planning and student achievement.

METHODOLOGY

Following the formation of a provincial level advisory committee to the research, two surveys were developed in collaboration with the ASCA and members of the advisory committee. One was designed for school council members, chairs and principals with an extended section for school principals. A shorter second survey was developed for superintendent and school board chairs. SAEE contracted Insightrix Research Services, a professional survey firm, to administer the surveys in both print and online format with a telephone option available. Copies of the surveys are located in the Appendix section of this report.

Data Collection

Superintendent and School Board Chair Survey

Superintendents and school board chairpersons of 57 school jurisdictions in Alberta were invited to provide their views on school councils in Alberta.[3] An initial letter was sent by SAEE to superintendents and school board chairpersons from a list provided by ASCA. This

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[3] Yellowknife Boards, Lloydminster Boards and Northlands School Division were excluded from the survey due to unique schooling administration.

communication contained information on the research study, a copy of the questionnaire and a unique survey link to access the online survey. Superintendents and chairpersons were asked to participate in the research by completing the paper questionnaire and returning by fax, arranging a telephone interview (toll-free number provided), or completing the survey online. All those contacted were advised their participation was voluntary and that their responses were guaranteed anonymity.

Insightrix also conducted follow-up calls reminding superintendents and chairpersons of the data collection timeline and providing them the opportunity to complete the survey over the phone at that time or another time more convenient. In total, 45 surveys were completed by superintendents and 47 surveys were completed by chairpersons between April 16th and May 16th, 2008. This translates to a 78.9% response rate for superintendents and an 82.5% response rate for chairpersons. The margin of error at a confidence interval of 95% is ±6.8 percentage points (finite population correction factor applied) for superintendents and ±6.0 percentage points for chairpersons. For further details on response rates and mode of response please refer to Table A.1 in the Appendix section of this report.

School Council Member, Chair and Principal Survey

For the principal, council chair and member survey, Insightrix Research was provided by ASCA and Alberta Education with a list of 1,492 schools in Alberta. Of these contacts 92 were deemed not qualified to participate in the study for reasons such that the school or jurisdiction did not currently have an organized school council(s) or because of duplication in the list resulting in a total of 1400 schools being invited to participate in the survey.

The sampling approach selected was to survey the chair, principal, and one other member who was to be designated by the chair from each school council. Initial contact was made through emails to 366 chairs of councils who were members of ASCA for whom email addresses were available. Letters were sent by mail to 1,034 principals of the remaining ASCA member schools and non-ASCA member schools. This invitation contained:

- Information about the study and how to complete the survey:
  - Chairs of councils which were members of ASCA were asked to complete the survey and forward the letter to their school principals and another member of the school council.
  - Principals were asked to complete the survey and forward the letter to their school council chair, who would then choose another member of school council to participate in the survey.
- A separate unique link to individual online surveys assigned to the school council chair, the principal and the other council member to be designated.
- Contact information for questions or more information on the study.

The email invitations sent to council chairs for whom email addresses were available (366) contained the same three unique survey links for each school and information on how to complete the survey by clicking on the link labeled "School Council Chair". Chairs were requested to forward the invitation to their school principal and another designated council member so they could complete the survey by clicking on the unique link assigned.

All of those contacted were advised that their participation was voluntary and all responses were guaranteed anonymity.

Insightrix completed a number of follow-up calls to school principals reminding them of the data collection timeline and providing them the opportunity to complete the survey by telephone and to remind them to contact their council chair regarding the survey and data collection deadlines. Links to the survey information and notices regarding the research were also provided to their membership by the ASCA, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS).

In total, 1,518 school council surveys were completed between April 16th and May 12th, 2008. A breakdown of returns by respondent group is shown in Table 1.2. For details on their mode of response, please see the Appendix section.

Table 1.2 School Level Survey Response Rates

Group	Total Complete	Response Rate (based on 1,400 valid schools)
Principal	813	58.1%
School Council Chair	470	33.6%
School Council Member	235	16.8%
Total	**1,518**	**36.1%**

Based on the participation rates and the need for respondents to pass on survey links to other potential respondents, the response rate was lower than targeted for school council members and chairs. Of the possible 1,400 contacts, the following response rates were achieved: principals (58%), chairs (34%) and other designated council member (17%). The margins of error at a 95% confidence interval are: ±2.2 percentage points (principals), ±3.7 (chairs) and ±6.4 percentage points (other members). Where applicable, finite population correction factors have been applied.

Distribution of Respondents

Respondents represent a large variety of different school types in terms of enrolment, location and grade levels. They exhibit differing levels of experience working on councils. A table detailing the number of respondents by district is located in the Appendix section of the report in Table A2.

Respondents were asked to provide information about their schools and indicate which jurisdiction they were located in; however to ensure confidentiality respondents were not asked to name their school. Principals, school council chairs and members who participated in the survey are most commonly located in K–6 schools, followed by K–9. The majority of respondents represent a school enrolling between 200 and 500 students. Approximately one quarter of respondents in each group is on the council of a school having fewer than 200 students. A figure indicating the reported enrollment of the schools where respondents were situated is included in the Appendix section of this report in Figure A1.

Levels of Experience

In terms of respondents experience on councils, members had the least number of years of experience followed by chairs. Principals had the most experience.

One quarter of school council members have served on their current council for less than one year, one third have one to three years experience on council, and 50 % have more than three years. In total experience, 14.9% of these respondents have been on any council for less than one

year, one quarter between one and three years (25.6%) and the remaining 59.6% for more than three years.

On average, school council chairs have more experience working with their school council than members do. A total of 38.3% chairs have one to three years of experience on their current council and the remaining 47.2% have three or more years of experience. In terms of total experience, 23.8% have served on a council for 1 to 3 years, and the majority have served on a council for 3 years or more (68.5%).

As might be expected, principals have on average, the most total experience with school councils. Almost 92% have three or more years experience with council participation, with one half serving this length of time on their current council (49.7%). A total of 22.6% of principals have served on their current council for less than one year and 27.7% between one and three years. Just 8.1% have less than three years of total experience. Respondents' experience is indicated in Figures 1.1 and 1.2.

Figure 1.1 Principal, Member and Chair Years of Experience on Current School Council
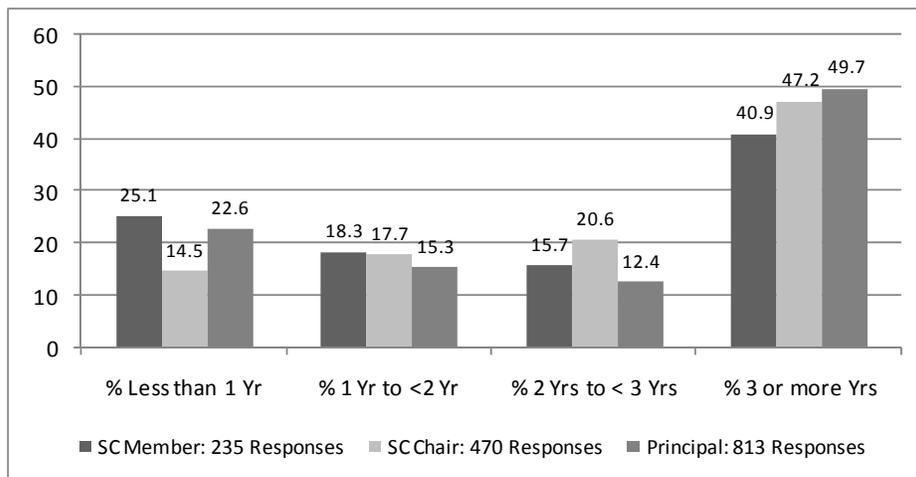
Figure 1.2 Principal, Member and Chair Years of Experience on Any School Council
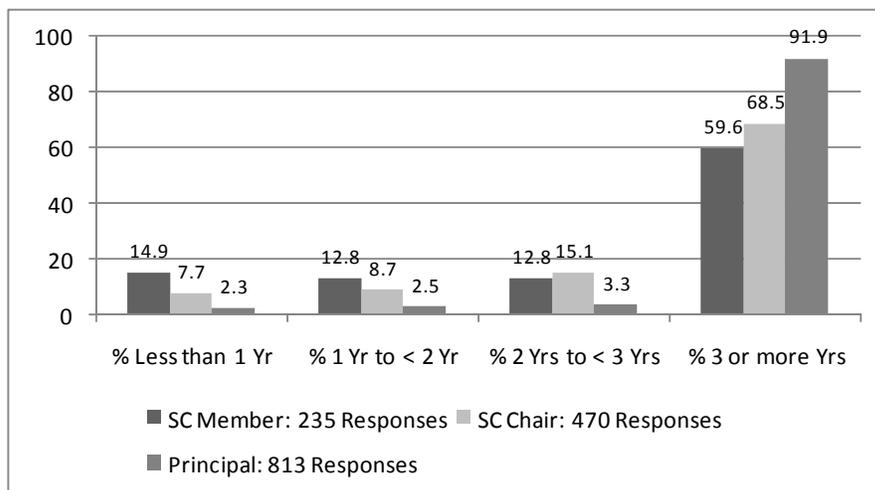
Data Analysis and Reporting

Data from both the school level and jurisdictional level surveys were analyzed by respondent groups under the specific themes explored in the questionnaires. Where questions in the two surveys overlapped, the responses of all five respondent groups were compared. The responses to 8 open-ended questions in the school council survey and 5 open-ended questions in the jurisdiction level survey were coded by the dominant themes that emerged prior to analysis and reporting. This categorization was a two-step process, initially performed by Insightrix and further refined by SAEE. Categorization of these responses was necessarily subjective, with some responses assigned to multiple categories, and use of an *Other* category for those that defied further classification beyond the dominant themes (usually less than 4% of responses).

The information obtained from the surveys is organized and presented under the following themes:

- Governance and Operating Procedures
- Educational/ School Improvement Planning
- Communication, Outreach and Membership
- Training and Development
- Resources, Support and Networking
- Success and Challenges

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

Following this introductory section, the results of both surveys are presented in an integrated manner under Survey Findings, organized under the dominant themes listed above. The subsequent discussion section attempts to interpret these results and their implications for the development of school councils in Alberta and the various stakeholders associated with their work. The report concludes with a set of recommendations drawn from this evidence. The resulting draft report was reviewed by the ASCA and a provincial advisory committee who provided useful feedback prior to the publication of the final report.

2 Survey Findings

Five main stakeholder groups were identified and surveyed for the purposes of this report: superintendents and school board chairs, representing the jurisdictional level, and principals, school council chairs and school council members at the school level. As was described in the previous section, superintendents and board chairs were given one set of survey questions relating to the leadership of school councils from the perspective of the jurisdiction. A separate survey was developed and administered to principals, school council chairs and members with additional specific questions for principals only.

Data gathered from surveys at the school and jurisdictional level have been grouped for presentation under six main categories: Governance and Operating Procedures; School Improvement Planning; Communication Outreach and Membership; Training and Development; Resources and Support; and Success and Challenges.

GOVERNANCE AND OPERATING PROCEDURES

> *Alberta Education believes that major decisions about policies, instructional programs and services and the allocation of funds to support them must be made collaboratively. School-based decision-making should involve collaboration between the principal, superintendent, teachers, instructional support staff, parents and the community in keeping with the policies of the Board of Trustees.* (Policy, 1.8.2- School Based Decision Making, ASCRM, revised 2007, p. XIV).

School councils, as mandated advisory groups are guided by provincial, jurisdictional and school 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. (ASCRM, p. 5).

According to the Alberta School Councils' Resource Manual (ASCRM), school councils may choose the most appropriate governance style to fit their needs. The two most common models are (a) representative, in which a small group of council members meet, and report back to the community on decisions or (b) the assembly/town hall model, where an open meeting is held with the entire school community and council members act to carry out decisions made in that forum. Typical ways for making decisions are by consensus or majority vote. Rules of order may be adopted to formalize discussions.

To gather information on school council governance and operating procedures on the ground, principals, school council chairs and members were asked to indicate their level of agreement to six statements on a five-point scale indicating that they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or disagree with the following statements or indicate a statement was not applicable:

- I feel confident in my ability to work in a collaborative group
- I feel confident in my ability to run an effective meeting
- I feel satisfied with how student achievement data is explained to the council
- I have a clear understanding of what our council is expected to accomplish
- I have a working knowledge of our council by-laws and operating procedures
- I have a clear understanding of the legislation governing school councils

The results, seen in Figure 2.1, indicate a majority of principals strongly agree with all six statements. The highest agreement ratings are seen in the level of confidence with working in a collaborative group with ratings of somewhat or strongly agree from 93.6%, followed by running an effective meeting (87.4%) and the explanation of student achievement data to the council (76.1%). The lowest level of agreement was found for the statement "I have a clear understanding of the legislation governing school councils"; however, more than one half of principals responding still strongly agree with this statement (54.9%).

Among council chairs, almost all (97.2%) agree that they feel confident in their ability to work in a collaborative group (75% strongly and 22.1% somewhat). Chairs feel quite confident in running effective meetings with more than half strongly agreeing and 36.2% somewhat agreeing. Satisfaction with the way student achievement data is explained to council (92.4%) was also quite high. However, the lowest level of agreement was seen in relation to statements regarding confidence with by-laws and legislation. Fewer than one quarter strongly agree with, "I have a clear understanding of the legislation governing school councils" (22.2%) and 56.7% somewhat agree with this statement.

School council members responded to the same set of questions. The only statements with which a majority of school council members strongly agree is "I feel confident in my ability to work in a collaborative group" (70.9%). Contrarily, the statements "I have a working knowledge of our council by-laws/operating procedures" (27.8%) and "I have a clear understanding of the legislation governing school councils" (14.2%) received the lowest proportion of strong agreement, with a larger number likely to say that they somewhat agree, disagree or don't know. Figure 2.1 contains percentage of respondents that selected somewhat or strongly agree to the statements in the left hand column, and are presented by group.

To gather input on the application of procedures, we asked principals, council chairs and members to indicate levels of agreement on the consistent application of by-laws, procedures and decision-making processes. About one half (57.1%) of school council chairs strongly agree that their council follows consistent operating procedures/by-laws and decision-making processes. Agreement is highest among principals, with 93% either somewhat (57.1%) or strongly (35.9%) agreeing. As would be expected, since school council members indicated less confidence in their knowledge of by-laws and operating procedures, the level of agreement with whether or not these were commonly used was also lower among this group. Figure 2.2 presents the results of the three groups showing the number of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statement.

Figure 2.1 School Council Organizational Processes
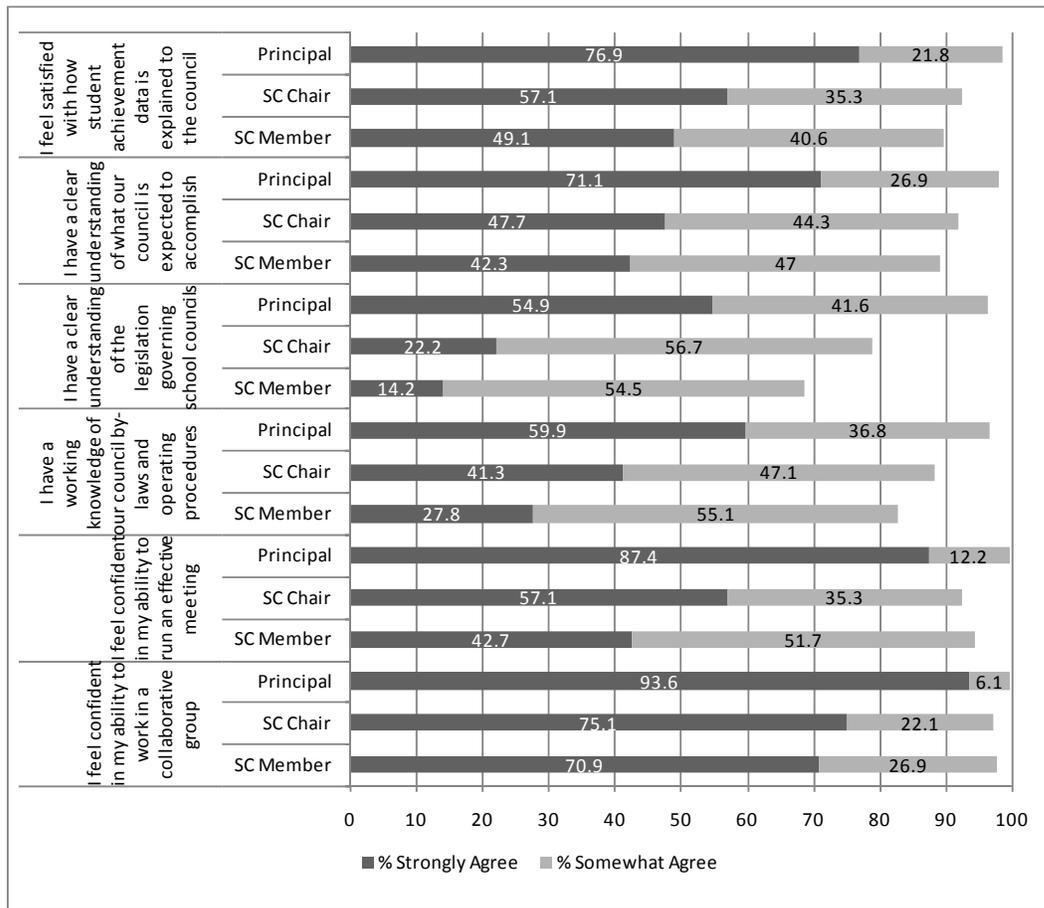
Figure 2.2 Consistent Use of By-laws and Operating Procedures
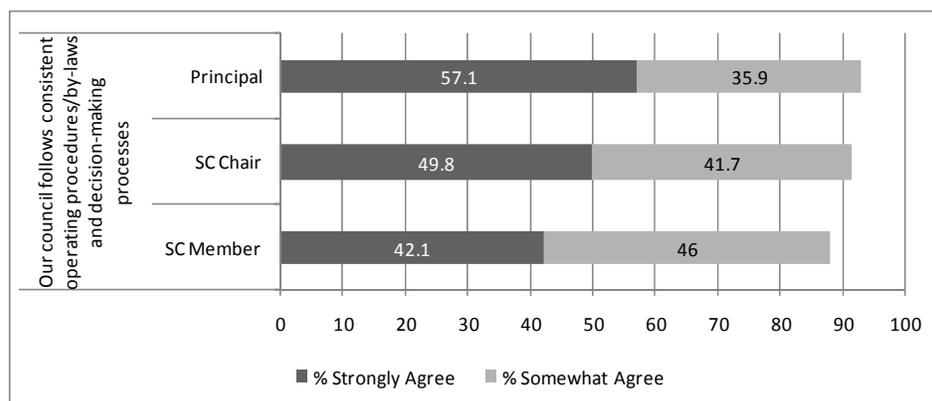
School council members, chairs and principals were additionally asked to respond to two questions related to whether the school council refers to the school and jurisdiction policy or provincial legislation for guidance. Jurisdictional and school policy is referenced more frequently by members, chairs and principals than provincial legislation, as seen in Figure 2.3 below.

Principals are the group most likely to refer to policy, with 90.7% in strong agreement that the council refers to jurisdictional/ school guidelines and 61.6% to provincial guidelines. School council members were the most likely to respond that they did not, or were unaware of whether the council referred to, provincial legislation (57.9%) and jurisdictional/school (21.3%) policy.

Figure 2.3 Jurisdictional and School Policy/ Provincial Legislation
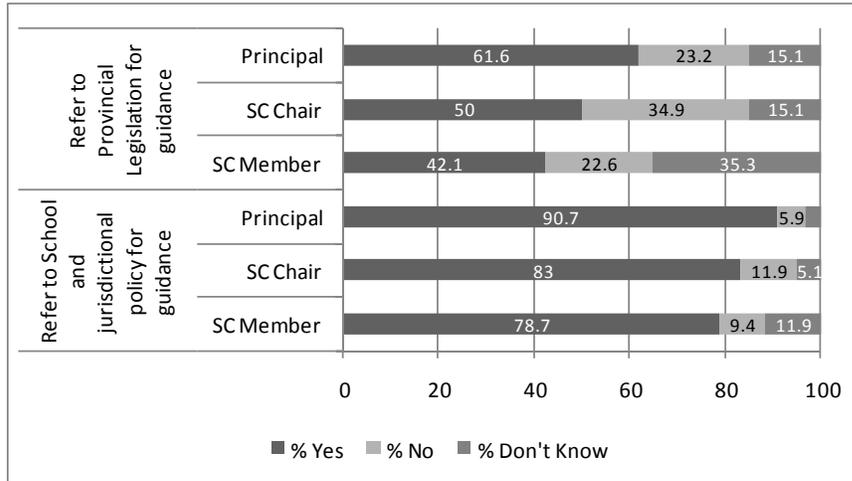
Superintendents and school board chairs were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale regarding the degree to which school councils have timely access to the information and documents required to do their work, which is inclusive of legislation, jurisdictional policy, and information regarding operating procedures. As seen in Figure 2.4, nearly 98% of school board chairs and 93.3% of superintendents agree or strongly agree that school councils have timely access to this information. School council chairs and members have lower ratings of familiarity with the legislation governing school councils, seen especially in the responses by school council members in the previous section (Figure 2.3). Superintendents and board chairs have high levels of agreement regarding the provision of information to councils. This apparent gap points to further work that may be needed in effectively communicating aspects of school council policy to members.

Figure 2.4 Superintendent and School Board Chairperson Rating of Access to Information
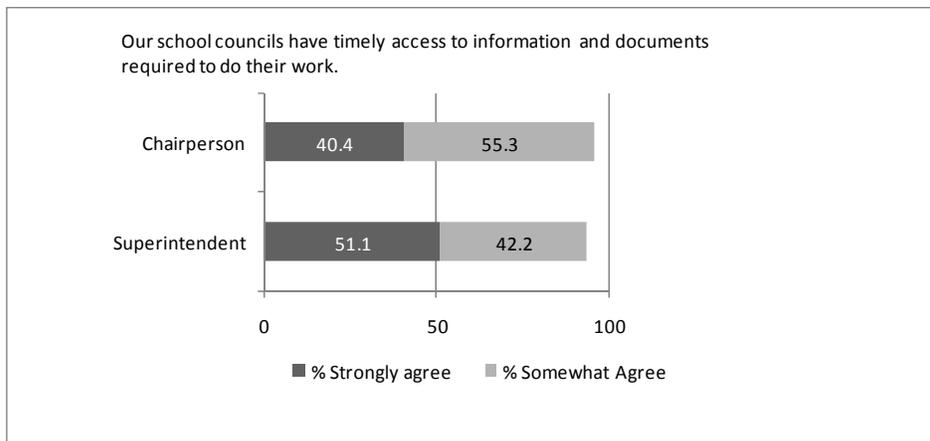
To gather information on how principals work with councils, we asked principals to approximate the percentage of their time devoted to working with the school council. Responses ranged from less than 5% to 20% or more, with the average amount of time being approximately 9% as seen in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Percentage of Principal Time Working with Council

Percent of Time Spent Working With the School Council	Count	Column N %
Less than 5%	127	17.4%
5% to 9%	272	37.3%
10% to 19%	243	33.3%
20% or more	87	11.9%

Additionally, council chairs, members and principals were asked to indicate how much time is spent on particular activities within the council's mandate. Principals indicated that the most time is spent on receiving advice from the council (32% on average) followed by fundraising (25%) and consulting or reporting to parents and the community (22%).

School council chairs report that consulting and reporting to parents and the community occupied the greatest proportion of their time (30%), followed by time spent on fundraising (24%) and providing advice to the school principal (24%).

School council members indicate that they spend the most time on average with fundraising (27%), followed by consulting and reporting to parents and the community (24%), and providing advice to the school principal (23%).

Overall, respondents in the three groups report the same three areas on which the council spends the largest percentage of their time; however the top category is different for each group. Principals perceive the councils in their schools spend the most time providing advice, council chairs believe the most time is spent on consulting and reporting to parents and the community, and council members believe the most amount of time is devoted to fundraising. This is summarized graphically in Figure 2.5. Further details on the allocation of time by respondent groups are located in a series of tables in the Appendix section of this report.

Figure 2.5 Percentage of Time Spent by Activity and Group

Providing advice to the school principal: School Council Chair 24%, Principal 32%, School Council Member 23%

Providing advice to the jurisdiction: School Council Chair 6%, Principal 6%, School Council Member 6%

Consulting/reporting to parents & community: School Council Chair 30%, Principal 22%, School Council Member 24%

Workshops and training: School Council Chair 4%, Principal 4%, School Council Member 4%

Networking with other school councils: School Council Chair 5%, Principal 4%, School Council Member 5%

Fundraising: School Council Chair 24%, Principal 25%, School Council Member 27%

Other: School Council Chair 8%, Principal 7%, School Council Member 10%

■ School Council Member ▨ Principal □ School Council Chair

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

Schools plan and implement Three Year Education Plans that are aligned with school jurisdiction and provincial direction. Education plans for schools are developed through administration and staff in consultation with school councils. The Guide for School Board Planning and Results Reporting states that "school councils must have the opportunity to participate in the development and implementation of the school's plan and the opportunity to develop and include strategies the council intends to pursue to support the achievement outcomes of the school's plan." In addition, school and jurisdictional plans must describe how the school council was involved in the development of the plan (Alberta School Council Resource Manual, Revised 2007, p.9).

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

To gather information at the jurisdictional level, we asked superintendents and school board chairs to indicate whether opportunities are provided to school councils for involvement in educational planning and advising school boards. Eight in ten respondents among board chairs

and superintendents believe that school councils are provided an opportunity for involvement in their jurisdiction's Three Year Education Plans (82.2% of superintendents and 80.6% board chairs).

Figure 2.6 Opportunity for Involvement in Jurisdiction's Three Year Plan
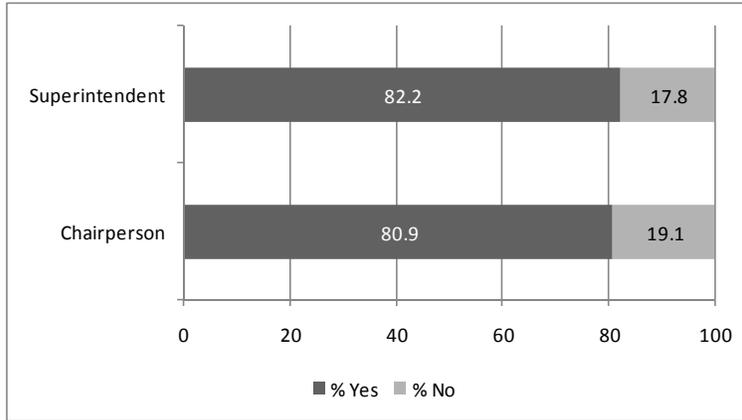
Regarding the extent to which school councils are involved in their jurisdiction's Three Year Education Plans, the majority of superintendents and board chairs mentioned both school level involvement (66.7% superintendents and 52.6% board chairs) and jurisdictional level involvement (58.3% superintendents and 57.9% board chairs). These responses were open ended, and are grouped by common theme in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Type of Involvement in Jurisdiction's Three-Year Plan

	Superintendent		Chairperson	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
School level involvement (i.e. involvement through principals at school council meetings/ Principals lead process/Receive input from councils/ School level input/ Review feedback, sign off, etc.)	24	66.7	20	52.6
District level involvement (i.e. Board, School councils, community consultation processes, town hall meetings, etc.)	21	58.3	22	57.9
Input provided through surveys/questionnaires	3	8.3	3	7.9
No response	0	0	1	2.6
Total	**36**	**100**	**38**	**100**

> *School councils are important forums through which members of school communities play a role in school improvement planning. To increase meaningful involvement of parents, school councils should be aware of the Three Year Education Plan of their school and consider developing a complementary school council plan* (ASCRM, p. 29).

To gather input on the role of school councils in providing advice on educational planning at the school level, principals, school council chairs and members were asked to respond to a series of questions related to this role.

When asked the question, "Does your school council provide advice on the school's Three Year Education Plan and Annual Results Report?" principals are most likely to respond affirmatively, and a higher number of school council members are unsure as seen in Figure 2.7.

Figure 2.7 Providing Advice on the Education Plan and Annual Results Report
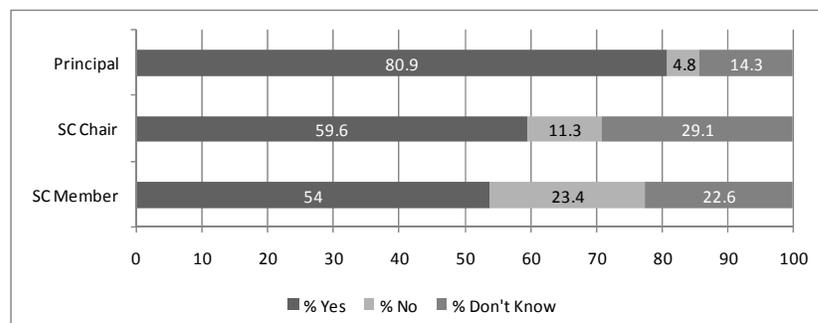
The same groups of respondents were asked to provide further details on the ways in which the council was involved in providing advice on developing or revising their school's Three Year Education Plan during the past year. Principals are much more likely to reply that their council was involved in all of the areas listed in Table 2.3 than school council chairs or members. All three groups indicate that "explanation and discussion of the completed plan" is the most common method of involvement (37.4% of council members, 68.5% of principals, 44.7% of chairs), followed by "reviewing student achievement data with respect to school improvement planning" (34.9% of council members, 61.4% of principals and 44.3% of chairs) and "providing feedback and recommendations on the draft plan" (34.0% of members, 60.4% of principals and 39.4% of chairs). Overall, explanation and discussion of the completed plan, reviewing student achievement data with respect to student improvement planning and providing feedback and recommendations on the draft plan are the most common avenues mentioned by all respondent groups for school council involvement in developing or revising the school's Three Year Education plan during the past year.

Table 2.3 School Council Involvement in School's Three Year Education Plan

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Explanation and discussion of the completed Plan	88	37.4	557	68.5	210	44.7
Reviewing student achievement data with respect to school improvement planning	82	34.9	499	61.4	208	44.3
Providing feedback and recommendations on the Draft Plan	80	34	491	60.4	185	39.4
Consultations during the development of the Plan	43	18.3	363	44.6	110	23.4
Advising on school initiatives in the Plan	38	16.2	413	50.8	101	21.5
Participating on related school committees	25	10.6	193	23.7	66	14
Other (please specify):	22	9.4	21	2.6	40	8.5
Don't know	82	34.9	45	5.5	96	20.4
Total	**235**	**100**	**813**	**100**	**470**	**100**

Councils play a role not only in the planning phases, but in implementation as well. To capture school council's work in this area, principals, council chairs and members were asked to elaborate on the ways school councils supported the implementation of priorities and goals set out in the school's Three-Year Education Plan.

As with the previous question, principals are much more likely to have a higher rating for all areas listed in Table 2.4 than are school council chairs and members, who have high percentages of "Don't Know" responses. The top three areas for all groups are providing information to parents (36.2% of members, 68.4% of principals and 50.4% of chairs), suggesting council activities to support the goals in the plan (33.6% of members, 60.5% of principals and 43.2% of chairs), and funding specific activities (32.3% of members, 56.9% of principals and 34.7% of chairs).

Providing information to parents, suggesting council activities to support the goals in the plan and funding of specific initiatives were the most frequently mentioned ways in which the school council supported the implementation of priorities and goals set out in the School's Three-Year Education Plan. Open ended responses have been grouped by theme in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 Council's Activities Supporting the School's Three Year Education Plan

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Providing information to parents	85	36.2	556	68.4	237	50.4
Suggesting council activities to support the goals in the Plan	79	33.6	492	60.5	203	43.2
Funding of specific initiatives	76	32.3	463	56.9	163	34.7
Membership on committees on specific school initiatives	36	15.3	189	23.2	68	14.5
Other (please specify):	25	10.6	28	3.4	33	7
Gathering information or conducting surveys	24	10.2	186	22.9	68	14.5
Developing a formal Council Plan to support the School Plan	16	6.8	94	11.6	42	8.9
Don't know	82	34.9	71	8.7	118	25.1
Total	**235**	**100**	**813**	**100**	**470**	**100**

Councils have the option of formalizing their work by developing their own Three Year Plan that coincides with and supports that of the school. When asked whether the school council has established its own Three Year Plan, a consistently small proportion of each group indicated their council has done so (17.0% of members, 13.5% of principals and 15.7% of chairs).

Figure 2.8 Establishment of the Council's Three Year Plan
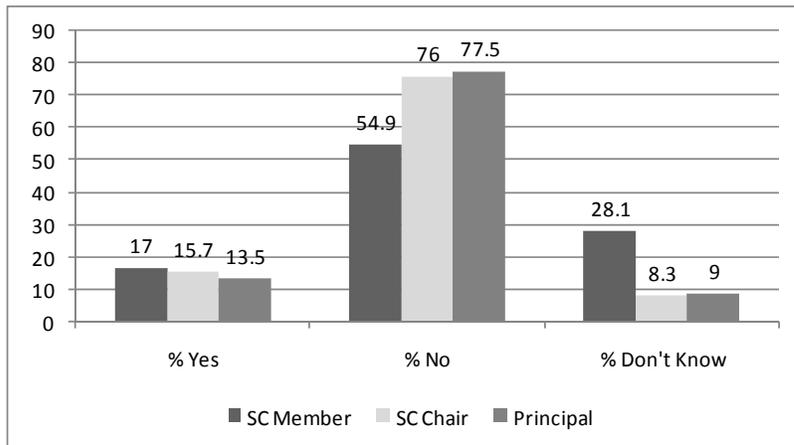
Of those whose councils have established a Three Year Plan, more than three quarters of each group report that this is evaluated on an annual basis (75.0% of members, 80.9% of principals and 78.4% of council chairs).

Figure 2.9 Evaluation of the Council's Three Year Plan
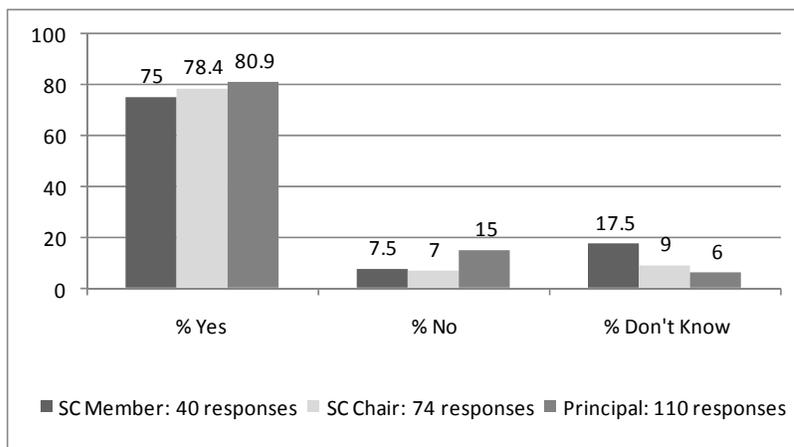
Having access to the relevant information to function in an advisory capacity is an important element of the educational planning role of school councils. To gather input on this, we asked superintendents and board chairs how their jurisdiction ensures all councils are provided with their school's results on the provincial achievement testing program, an interpretation of these results, and information about the school's Education Plan and Annual Results Report. A large majority (91.1% of superintendents and 82.2% of chairpersons) mentioned school level communication which would rely on the principal as the key avenue for distributing information. A further 51.1% of superintendents and 37.8% of chairpersons mentioned jurisdictional level communication. Jurisdiction-wide opportunities for collaboration include multiple stakeholder meetings (mentioned by 51.2% of superintendents and 56.5% of chairpersons) and Council of School Councils meetings (COSC) (mentioned by 46.5% of superintendents and 54.3% of chairpersons).

Table 2.5 Methods of Providing Councils with Information for Educational Planning:
                Superintendent and Board Chair

	Superintendent		Chairperson	
	Total #	**% of Responses**	**Total #**	**% of Responses**
School Level Communication (I.e. Principals/ School leaders, School planning processes/ Information is presented to school council/Parent meetings; Principal shares information/Reports documents)	41	91.1	37	82.2
District Level Communication (I.e. Superintendent, district/ jurisdiction administrators, trustees, school board shares information, holds meeting with council/ principal)	23	51.1	17	37.8
Information/ Reports made available online	19	42.2	9	20
Results available through newsletters, press releases and media conferences	8	17.8	5	11.1
Don't know if information is shared with council	0	0	1	2.2
Total	**45**	**100**	**45**	**100**

Comments gathered from superintendents and board chairs that depict the process involved include:

> *The school council chairs are involved in the district's plans. The results are reported to the schools and to the boards at the district level. Individual schools report their results to the individual school councils. Everyone is required to be involved in the education plans at the school level, and I check to make sure this has occurred* (Superintendent).

> *The annual education results reports are given to the individual schools by the Board office, and they are available on the web. The school by school results are handled by the principals of the schools* (Board Chair).

> *Each school prepares a year-in-review report that summarizes and interprets test results and outlines major initiatives and strategies for improvement. Those reports are presented to school councils, discussed at parent meetings, and widely circulated* (Superintendent).

Principals, chairs, and school council members were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with how well student achievement data is explained and how well they understand their role with respect to this. Findings related to these two issues are are broken down by respondent type in Figure 2.10. Principals indicate the highest level of agreement with both statements and school council members were more likely than the other two groups to answer with "No" or "Don't Know".

Figure 2.10 Explanation of Student Achievement Data and Understanding of Role
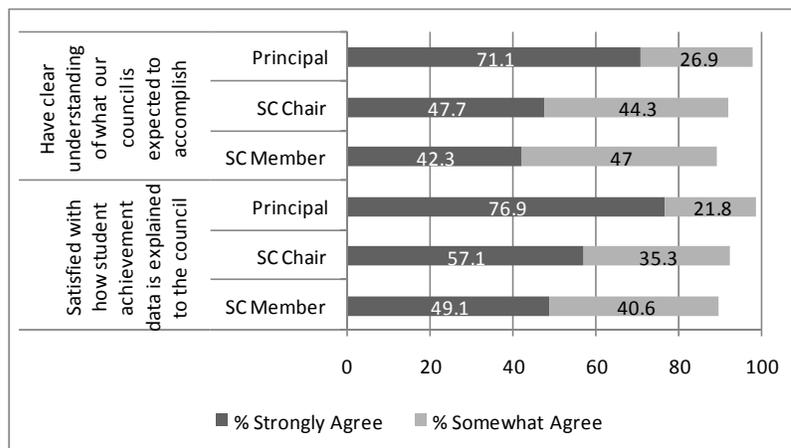
We sought to gain an understanding of the perceptions of effectiveness of school councils in their advisory role in educational planning. In a separate set of questions, principals were asked to rate their school council's effectiveness in supporting educational achievement at the school. Just over 30% believe the school council is very effective in supporting educational achievement and a further one half believe it is somewhat effective (50.9%). A total of 15.4% believe it is not very or not at all effective.

Figure 2.11 Principal Ratings of Council Effectiveness in Supporting Educational Achievement
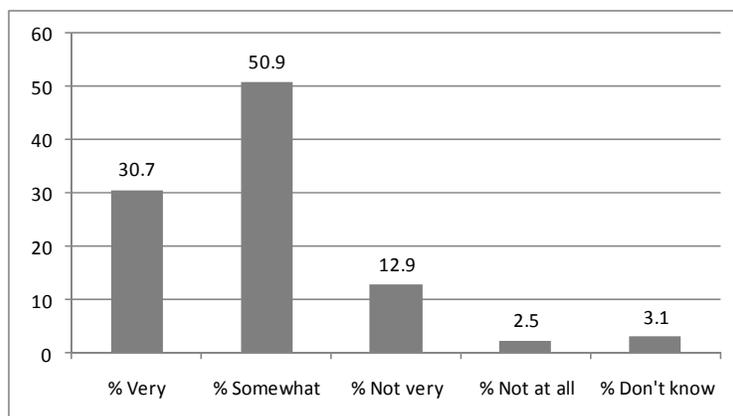
Superintendents and school board chairs were also asked to rate the effectiveness of school councils in their jurisdictions during the past year in playing a meaningful role in district improvement processes. More than three quarters of respondents rate the effectiveness of the school councils in their jurisdictions as somewhat or very effective. This is seen in the second section of Figure 2.12.

Building positive relationships with the principal and other school and community stakeholders is given the highest success rating by superintendents, with 42.2% saying their school councils are very effective in this area and a further 53.3% rating them as somewhat effective. The effectiveness of their school council in playing a meaningful role in district improvement processes is rated as very effective by one quarter (26.7%) and somewhat effective by another

48.9%. The councils' effectiveness in influencing school priorities for improving student achievement is rated as very effective by 13.3% and somewhat effective by 62.2% of superintendents.

Effectiveness ratings of the three areas are very similar between superintendents and chairpersons. More than one half of chairpersons rate the effectiveness of their school councils in building positive relationships with the principal and other school and community stakeholders as very effective (51.1%) and a further 42.6% rate it as somewhat effective. Playing a meaningful role in district improvement processes and influencing school priorities for improving student achievement are both rated somewhat or very effective by three quarters of respondents (78.8%). Figure 2.12 summarizes chairperson and superintendent ratings of council effectiveness.

Figure 2.12 Effectiveness Rating: School Board Chairs and Superintendents
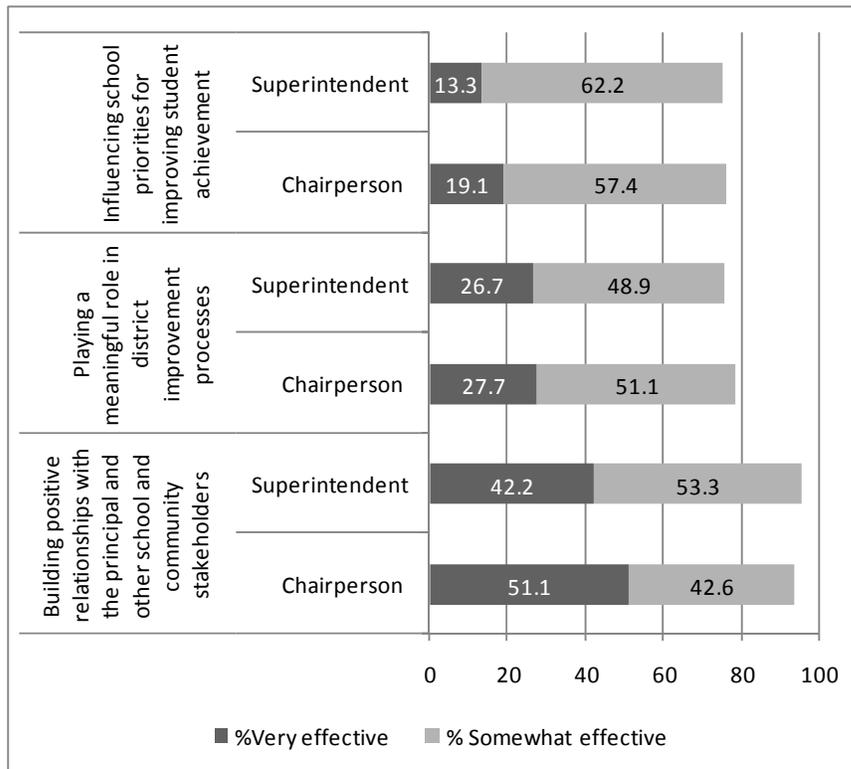
GOALS AND PRIORITIES

Gathering information on council goals and priorities provides insight into the areas of work on which councils are placing emphasis and which aspects 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. Notably, school council members and chairs are more likely to mention establishing fundraising activities as one of their top three priorities whereas principals are more likely to mention supporting student achievement as top goals set within the past year.

More than one half of school council members (54.8%) cite fundraising activities or increased financial support as one of the three most important goals or priorities. Other commonly mentioned goals include increasing or encouraging parental involvement (30.5%), increasing or

establishing effective communication with outside groups (28.8%), developing a safe and healthy school (26.0%) and supporting student achievement (26.0%). Principals most commonly mentioned supporting student achievement (51.2%) and establishing fundraising activities (47.2%) as being the dominant priorities of the council. Increasing or establishing effective communication (26.0%), enhancing school spirit (21.8%), increasing or encouraging parental involvement (21.1%) and developing safe and healthy schools (20.2%) also received a large number of mentions.

Goals mentioned most often by school council chairs include establishing fundraising activities (46.2%), increasing or establishing effective communication (36.7%), increasing or encouraging parental involvement in school (36.4%) and supporting student achievement (30.6%). The most frequently stated responses in each group are summarized in Figure 2.13 and further detail is provided in the Appendix section of this report.

Figure 2.13 Priorities and Goals: Principals, School Councils Members and Chairs
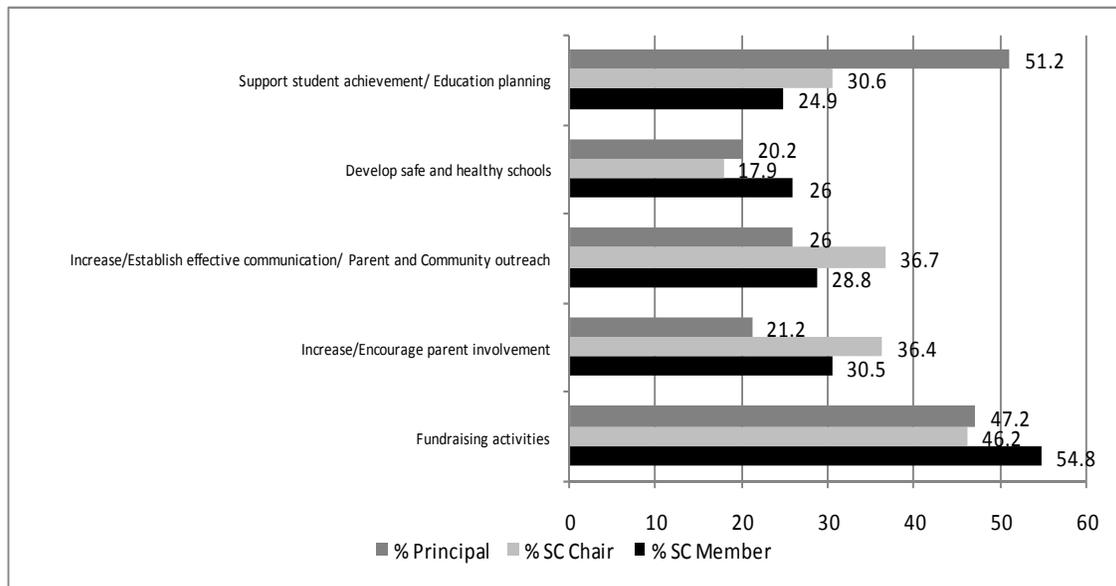
COMMUNICATION, OUTREACH AND MEMBERSHIP

> *A school council is representative of parents and others from the broader school community. It is important that the school council identify ways and means to check the pulse of the school community and ensure the community's wishes, goals and aspirations for its school are articulated through the school council* (ASCRM, p. 6).

Close to 90% of all three sets of respondents indicate that their council seeks advice from the school community as seen in Figure 2.14.

Figure 2.14 Seeking Advice from the School Community
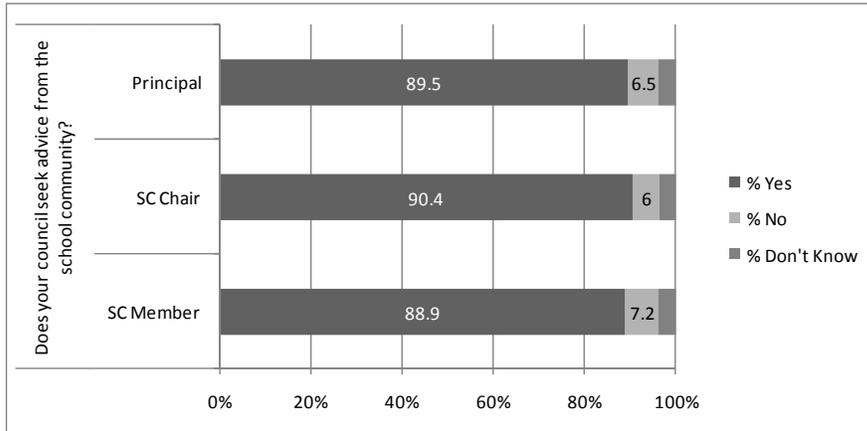
When asked to provide more detail on the tools and methods used <u>this year</u> for communicating with the school community, approximately nine in ten respondents within each group mention both meetings and newsletters as communication tools their council has utilized. Just over four in ten within each group have used websites, as summarized in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6 Communication Tools

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Meetings	222	94.5	777	95.6	456	97
Newsletters	210	89.4	743	91.4	436	92.8
Website	104	44.3	345	42.4	199	42.3
Sitting on Committees and Task Forces	62	26.4	242	29.8	161	34.3
Surveys	53	22.6	215	26.4	118	25.1
Formal reports	37	15.7	182	22.4	72	15.3
Emails	9	3.8	35	4.3	43	9.1
Phone Out	5	2.1	22	2.7	12	2.6
Bulletin Boards	6	2.6	8	1	16	3.4
Other (please specify):	17	7.2	71	8.7	50	10.6
Don't know	2	0.9	6	0.7	3	0.6
Total	**235**	**100**	**813**	**100**	**470**	**100**

Respondents were also asked which topics they consult with the school community about. School goals/ priorities was the most frequently mentioned area of consultation in the past year, according to 65.1% of council members, 78.8% of principals and 63.6% of chairs. As seen in Table 2.7, involvement in the jurisdiction's Three Year Plan was the least mentioned by all three groups.

Table 2.7 Type of Consultation with School Community

Consultation Type	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
School goals and priorities	153	65.1	641	78.8	299	63.6
School programs	135	57.4	558	68.6	276	58.7
Student Achievement	123	52.3	575	70.7	274	58.3
Community Issues	113	48.1	524	64.5	230	48.9
School calendar	111	47.2	507	62.4	263	56
School budget	102	43.4	541	66.5	207	44
School policy development or review	94	40	450	55.4	200	42.6
Preparation of the school's Three Year Plan	81	34.5	535	65.8	173	36.8
Code of conduct	66	28.1	315	38.7	126	26.8
Jurisdiction policy development or review	39	16.6	216	26.6	110	23.4
Prep. of the Jurisdiction's Three-Year Plan	27	11.5	169	20.8	62	13.2
Other (please specify):	22	9.4	68	8.4	58	12.3
Don't know	21	8.9	8	1	17	3.6
Total	**235**	**100**	**813**	**100**	**470**	**100**

Councils have the option of networking with other councils through various means such as a school council umbrella group in the jurisdiction, or through the provincial associations of Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA). Chairpersons and superintendents were asked which jurisdiction-wide opportunities for school councils to collaborate with one another were provided in the past three years. The most commonly mentioned were multiple stakeholder meetings (51.2% of superintendents and 56.5% of chairpersons), and Council of School Councils (COSC) meetings (46.5% of superintendents and 54.3% of chairpersons). As seen in Table 2.8 below, one half of respondents in both groups noted multiple stakeholder meetings (51.2% and 56.5%) and Council of School Councils (COSC) meetings (46.5% and 54.3%) as collaboration opportunities.

Table 2.8 Jurisdictional Collaboration

	Superintendent		Chairperson	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Multiple Stakeholder meetings (I.e. Planning sessions, liaisons, roundtable consultation, sharing nights, get together, chairpersons, etc.)	22	51.2	26	56.5
Council of School Council/ COSC meetings	20	46.5	25	54.3
Workshops/ Training provided to all school councils in the school jurisdiction	8	18.6	5	10.9
Opportunity to attend an annual conference	3	7	0	0
There are opportunities for collaboration, but not specifically specified	2	4.7	1	2.2
No opportunities for collaboration yet in place	0	0	3	6.5
Total	**43**	**100**	**46**	**100**

If everyone adhered to a common code of ethics, there would never be any conflict of ideas or philosophies. However, differing views, opinions, and ideas about the work of school councils abound (ASCRM, p. 6).

Communication among members of the council is an equally important issue. School council chairs, members and principals were asked to respond to a series of statements related to communication and conflict resolution and indicate whether they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, or don't know.

Almost 83% of principals concur that their council has an effective process for resolving conflicts, with 42.8% strongly agreeing that this is the case. School council chairs strongly agree that their council uses formal communication tools to keep all members informed (52.9%) as do nearly half (48.5%) of members. One third of council members (32.3%) strongly agree that their council has an effective process for resolving conflict. Agreement is strongest among principals for both statements and weakest among school council members as indicated in Figure 2.15.

Figure 2.15 Communication Among Council Members
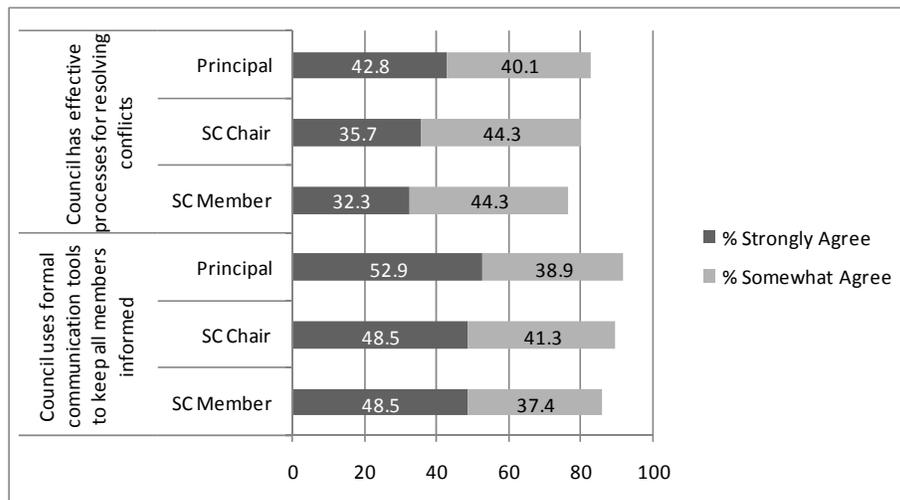
TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Training and resources for school councils are available through the Alberta School Councils' Association's School Council Development (SCD) program which provides workshops and resource materials to assist all school councils in the province. Funded by Alberta Education, this program has numerous supporting partners including the Alberta School Boards Association, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, Alberta Teachers' Association and Regional Professional Development Consortia. This initiative of the Alberta School Councils' Association includes workshops for school councils anywhere in Alberta, a toll free consultation line, instructor training to deliver workshops, and other resource materials.

The free workshops offered are facilitated by trained instructors and are organized around the following topics:

- Role and Responsibilities of School Council
- Recruiting and Retaining School Council Members
- School Councils and Planning
- School Councils and Fundraising Societies: Important Similarities and Differences

A new *School Council Resource Manual* was developed in 2006 and revised in 2007 by the Alberta School Councils' Association. It is distributed to all schools in Alberta and is available on the ASCA and Alberta Education websites.

We asked superintendents and board chairs whether their jurisdictions had sought support from the Alberta School Councils' Association in the past three years. Three quarters of superintendents indicated that they had done so (75.6%) compared to one half of chairpersons (53.2%) seen in Figure 2.16.

Figure 2.16 Percentage of Superintendents and School Board Chairs Seeking Support from ASCA in Past Three Years
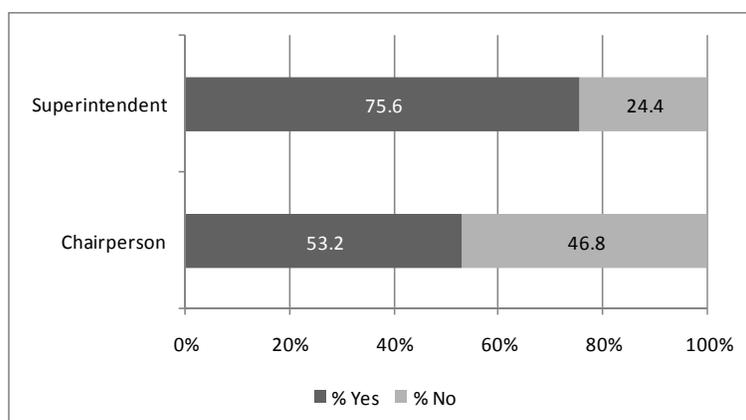
With regard to the type of support received from ASCA, most commonly, both superintendents and chairpersons have made training workshops (85.3% and 88.0% respectively) and resource materials (61.8% and 60.0%) available to councils in their jurisdictions as seen in Table 2.9. Additional methods of training mentioned under "other" include visits from the Executive Director of ASCA, response to inquiries, and information provided on resolutions.

Table 2.9 School District Support for School Councils

	Superintendent		Chairperson	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Training Workshops	29	85.3	22	88
Resource Materials	21	61.8	15	60
Other (Please specify):	3	8.8	2	8
Total	**34**	**100**	**25**	**100**

We asked school council members, chairs and principals about their participation in training workshops. Approximately one in five principals (20.2%) and school council chairs (19.6%) indicated their council had participated in one or more School Council Development training workshops during the past year. A smaller proportion of school council members (14.5%) indicated their council had participated in such training sessions yet they were notably more likely to be unsure of their council's participation (21.3%) compared to principals (7.9%) and chairs (3.0%), likely due to fewer years of experience on the council.

Figure 2.17 Council's Participation in One or More Training Workshops in the Current Year
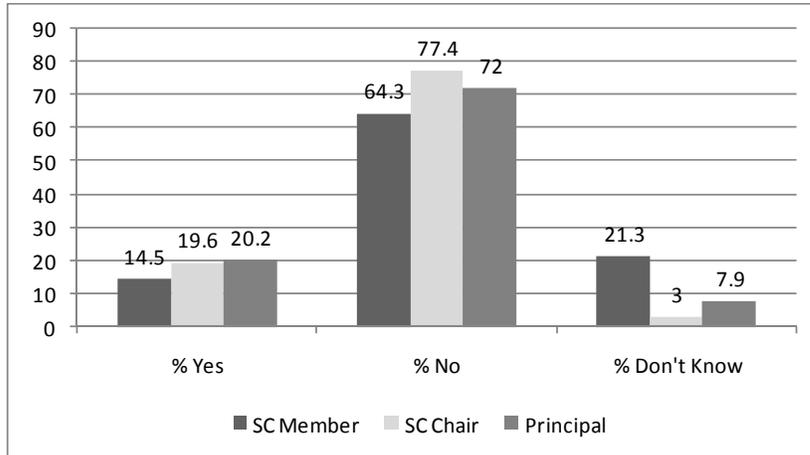
As seen in Figure 2.18, school council chairs (17.0%) are most likely to have participated in a workshop, followed by principals (13.0%). School council members surveyed (6.8%) are the least likely to have been involved in these training sessions.

Figure 2.18 Individual Participation in School Council Workshop in the Current Year
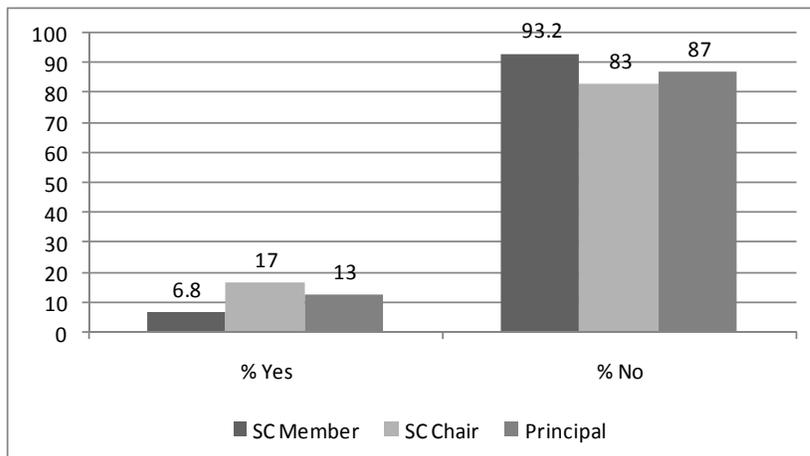
Those who have participated in workshops were asked to rate their agreement with a list of statements regarding the workshop's value and quality. Agreement is very high among all groups, with 70% or more giving the workshops a positive rating.

More than half in each group strongly agree that the workshops explained the mandate of councils (56.3% of members, 61.1% of principals, 57.5% of chairs). Similarly, the majority of respondents in each group strongly agree that the workshops were informative about the differences between a school council and a fundraising society (56.3% of members, 48.8% of chairs, and 51.9% of principals). Between four and five in ten of each group strongly agree that the workshops were informative about their role on the school council (43.8% of members, 44.4% of chairs, and 47.2% of principals). The workshop that deals with educational planning received somewhat lower levels of agreement as to its effectiveness (31.1% of school council members, 36.3% of school council chairs and 39.8% of principals strongly agree). Overall, school council chairs had the lowest total agreement with all four statements and principals the highest.

Figure 2.19 Effectiveness of Training: School Council Chair, Member and Principal
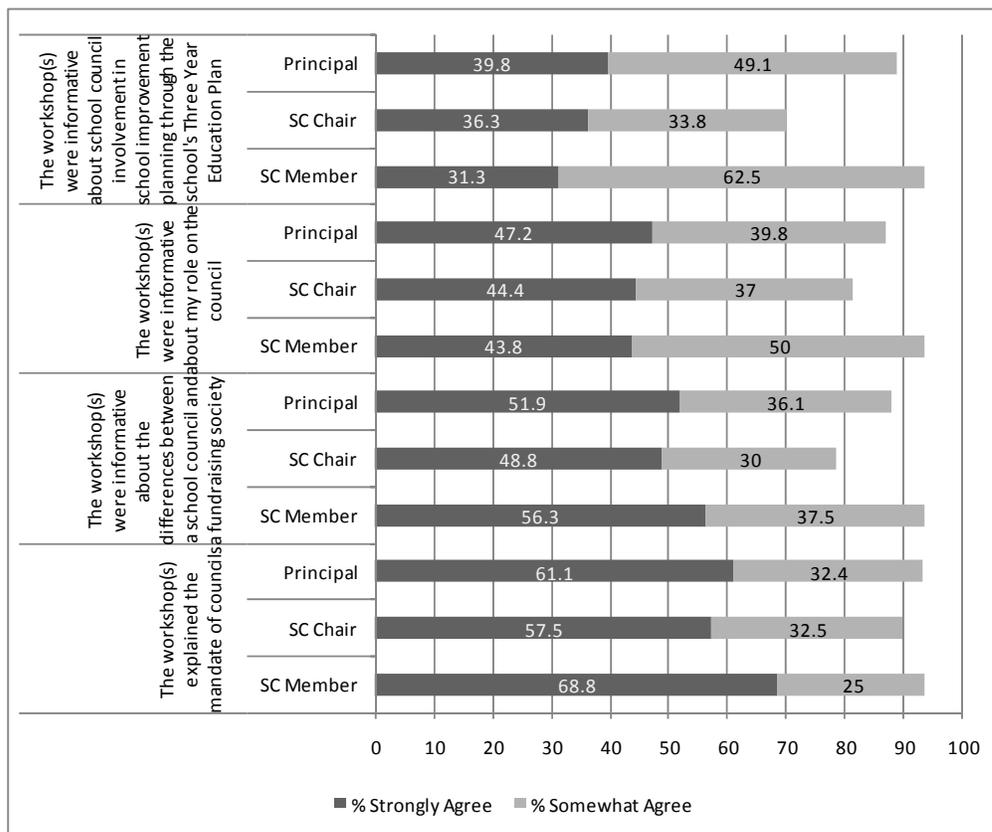
It is interesting to note that the effectiveness of training responses of school council members are more in line with those of principals. School council chairs exhibited a different pattern than in other questions where the responses of chairs and members were closer. School council chairs demonstrate lower levels of agreement than the other two groups in all areas.

Overall, council members are the most positive about all areas of the workshops, with 93.8% giving somewhat or strong agreement. Likewise, it should be noted that the number of council members who have received training and responded to this question constitutes a small sample size. Approximately nine in ten principals agree or strongly agree with each of the listed statements.

Superintendents and school board chairs indicated the extent to which they agree or disagree that school councils have access to sufficient training to develop the skills necessary to meet their mandate. Among superintendents, 53.3% somewhat agree and 31.1% strongly agree, for a total of 84.4% perceiving sufficient access to training to be present. Among chairpersons, three quarters of respondents somewhat (40.4%) or strongly (36.2%) agree that their school councils have access to sufficient training to develop the skills necessary to meet their mandate (76.6%), indicating a slightly lower level of agreement than seen with superintendents as depicted in Figure 2.20.

Figure 2.20 Access of Councils to Sufficient Training: Superintendents and Chairs
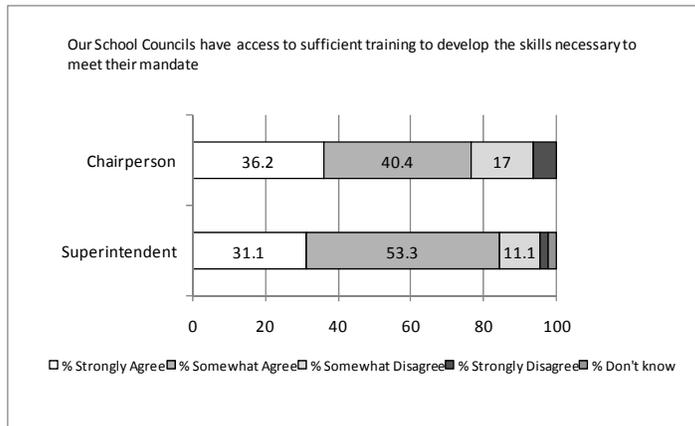
School council chairs, members and principals were also asked whether they believed that they had access to sufficient training to develop skills necessary to allow their school council to meet its mandate. The following table indicates the percentage of responses from all three groups that agree or strongly agree. Just over half of the council members (54.5%) feel there is sufficient training accessible to them. Principals rated their level of access much higher, with 78.2% agreeing with the statement.

Figure 2.21 Sufficient Training Available: Principals, Council Chairs and Members
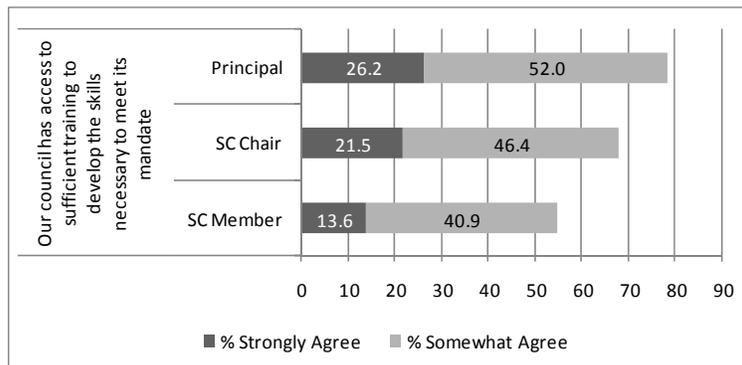
When asked about their council's training priorities, the top three issues mentioned by principals, chairs and members were the recruitment and retention of council members (39.6% of members, 28.6% of principals and 40.7% of chairs), roles and responsibilities (38.9% of members, 37.2% of

principals and 39.3% of chairs) and long-term planning (34.7% of members, 34.5% of principals and 35.1% of chairs). Recruitment is the highest priority of school council members and chairs, whereas training concerning roles and responsibilities is the top priority of principals. Responses are indicated in Table 2.10.

Table 2.10 Top Priorities of Principals, Council Members and Chairs

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Recruitment/ Retention of council members (I.e. Increase council awareness/ Involve parents)	57	39.6	136	28.6	124	40.7
Roles of Council or Members (Roles, responsibilities/ Regulations/ Administration/ Position, new member, leadership training)	56	38.9	177	37.2	120	39.3
Long-term planning/ Regulations/ Advocacy/ Administration/ Leadership/ Committee work/ Leadership succession	50	34.7	164	34.5	107	35.1
Relationship Building (team building, conflict resolution, networking, communication skills, working with teachers, working with principal, jurisdiction administration,)	35	24.3	97	20.4	64	21.0
Increase/ Establish effective communication with parents/ School/ Council	26	18.1	99	20.8	57	18.7
Establish fundraising activities/ Increase financial support	21	14.6	55	11.6	35	11.5
Need to promote/ Access training (I.e. Parent education, attending workshops, seminars or training events.)	20	13.9	64	13.4	69	22.6
Running efficient/ Effective meetings	15	10.4	84	17.6	38	12.5
Unaware of/ Never had training	12	8.3	32	6.7	25	8.2
Support student achievement (Education, academics)	10	6.9	40	8.4	3	1.0
(ASCA, Handbook, Government resources)	0	0.0	19	4.0	26	8.5
Other	4	2.8	6	1.3	3	1.0
Total	**144**	**100**	**476**	**100**	**305**	**100**

Participant comments regarding training priorities are seen in some of the typical responses captured below.

- *I suggest organizing information and training sessions to enable members of the Council to develop their skills as Council members.*

- *It is important to ensure new members are in place before the next school year to ensure side-by-side experience training.*

- *Providing all members with information on training opportunities and supporting that financially if need be is valuable.*

- *We need clarity of all major positions on council, not only executive positions.*

- *Retention and recruitment of members is a challenge.*

- *Team Building activities for our group that would fit in with already time crunched parents would be helpful.*

In view of the principal's pivotal role in the school, superintendents and board chairs were asked to provide information about the level of training available to principals in their jurisdictions to support their work with school councils. Most commonly, respondents mentioned meetings,

discussion and guidance from the superintendent, senior administrators and principals (45.7% superintendents and 45.2% board chairs) as opportunities provided for principals to acquire effective strategies for working with school councils. Workshops or professional development training are mentioned by notably more chairpersons than superintendents (40.5% vs. 19.6%).

Table 2.11 Opportunities for Principals to Acquire Strategies for Working with School Councils

	Superintendent		Chairperson	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Meetings, discussion and guidance from the Superintendent/Senior administrators/ Principals	21	45.7	19	45.2
Workshops, professional development training	9	19.6	17	40.5
Do not know what opportunities are provided to principals	8	17.4	0	0.0
Principals have the school council manual/handbook	7	15.2	9	21.4
Other opportunities	3	6.5	0	0.0
None/limited opportunities provided	2	4.3	4	9.5
Total	**46**	**100**	**42**	**100**

Principals were also asked whether opportunities were provided in their jurisdiction for them to acquire effective strategies for working with school councils. As seen in Figure 2.22, 60% of principals responded favourably to this question.

Figure 2.22 Opportunities to Acquire Training: Principal Responses
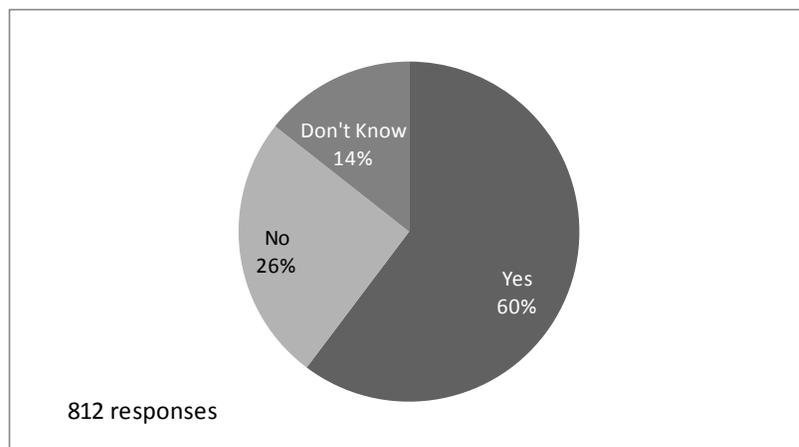
Principals elaborated on the types of opportunities available to them to acquire effective strategies for working with school councils. The top two most common responses are in line with the opportunities indicated by superintendents and board chairs in the previous section. Nearly nine in ten mention they are able to network with other principals (88.5%) and two thirds identified workshops (68.6%) and jurisdiction-developed materials (64.6%) as other opportunities to acquire effective strategies for working with their school council. Entries under "other" included Council of School Councils, joint meetings, consultations and the ASCA website.

Table 2.12 Types of Support for Principals

	Total #	% of Responses
Networking with other principals	437	88.5
Workshops	339	68.6
Jurisdiction developed materials (Guides, Policy manuals, etc)	319	64.6
Formal courses	49	9.9
Other (please specify):	29	5.9
Don't know	6	1.2
Total	**494**	**100**

RESOURCES, SUPPORT AND NETWORKING

Superintendents and school board chairs provided input on the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements regarding resources, support and networking available to school councils in their jurisdictions. Responses were quite favourable in each category as seen in Figure 2.23.

Four in ten superintendents strongly agree their school councils have adequate opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils, for a total of three quarters indicating agreement (77.8%). This is quite similar to the responses given by board chairs, among whom 42.6% strongly agree with the statement for a total of 87.3% in either strong or somewhat agreement. A total of 88.9% of superintendents and 85.2% of board chairs agree that their school councils have access to adequate resources to meet their responsibilities as set out in the school council regulations; however, the majority of superintendents agree somewhat (53.3%) as opposed to strongly agree (35.6%).

Figure 2.23 Views on Resources to Support School Councils: Superintendent and Board Chair
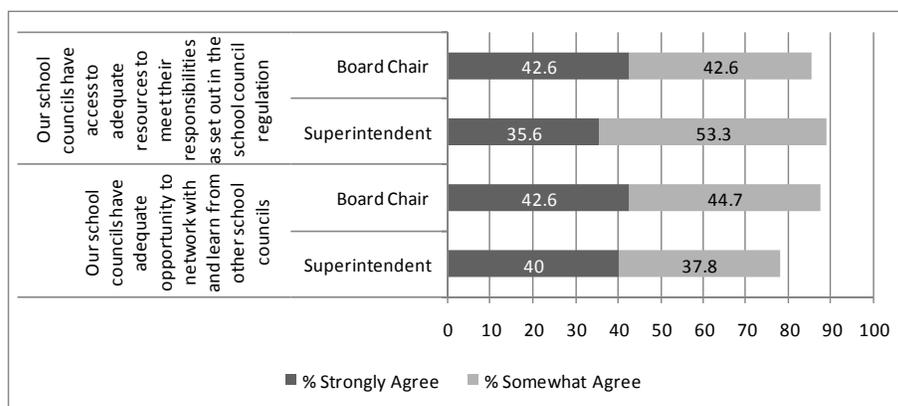
Principals, council chairs and members were asked to rate their agreement with a list of statements involving the availability and adequacy of resources. As with the previous questions of this type, principals consistently had the highest proportion of agreement and council members the lowest, with the exception of "Our council has adequate opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils". In this case, school council chairs (75.1%) hold the highest level of agreement for this statement.

More than eight in ten principals agree that their council has access to adequate funds to achieve its goal (80.3%), that their council has adequate resources to facilitate its work (88.7%) and that their council has adequate tools and support for communication and data-gathering (87.4%). Just over six in ten agree their council has sufficient members to fulfill its duties (62.3%). Among school council chairs, all statements received agreement from more than two thirds with the exception of "Our council has sufficient members to fulfill its duties". The majority (53.2%) disagree with this statement. Figure 2.24 shows levels of agreement on key resource issues. For all groups, maintaining sufficient membership on the council presents a challenge.

Figure 2.24 Availability and Adequacy of Council Resources: Principals, Chairs, Members
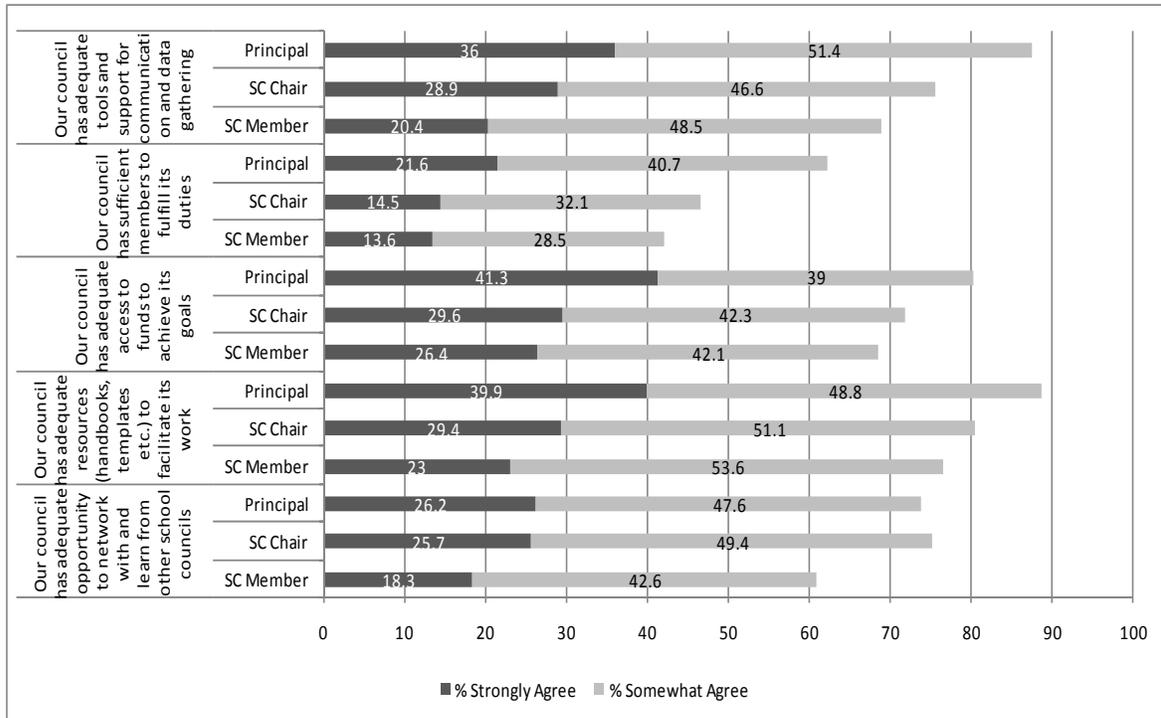
We asked principals, council members and chairs to identify the most important resources for their council. All three groups mentioned experienced members as being most useful (49.7% of members, 42.3% of principals and 34.3% of chairs). Even still, this category was chosen by notably more council members (49.7%) than school council chairs (34.3%). Principals were chosen as the most useful resource by more than one quarter of council members (28.3%) and school council chairs (33.8%). One third of principals (33.8%) and council chairs (33.1%) chose the Alberta School Councils' Association, compared to 15.0% of council members. Responses by each group are grouped in Table 2.13.

Table 2.13 Most Important Resources: Principals, Council Chairs and Members

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Experienced members/ Partners (I.e. Community members/ Parents/ Council members/ Current members/ Council leaders/ Other school councils/ Former members)	93	49.7	254	42.3	139	34.3
School principal/ Administration	53	28.3	30	5.0	137	33.8
Alberta School Councils' Association/ ASCA (I.e. Staff/ Training workshops/ Newsletters/ Website and resources provided by ASCA)	28	15.0	203	33.8	134	33.1
School teachers/ Faculty	14	7.5	19	3.2	25	6.2
School-Based resources (I.e. School manual, School Council bylaws and constitution)	13	7.0	60	10.0	40	9.9
School Council meetings	7	3.7	14	2.3	12	3.0
School board/ Trustees	6	3.2	30	5.0	21	5.2
Fundraising efforts	3	1.6	27	4.5	7	1.7
Government resources/ Alberta Education (I.e. Web/ Handbook provided by Alberta Ed./ Regulations)	2	1.1	13	2.2	0	0.0
Other	4	2.1	10	1.7	9	2.2
Don't know	8	4.3	9	1.5	5	1.2
Total	**187**	**100**	**600**	**100**	**405**	**100**

Sample open-ended responses included below indicate a diversity of perspectives on the most important resources, indicating a range of situations and models of operation that currently exist.

- *The most valuable resources are parent members, the AHSCA newsletter, and information on what is happening in other school councils.*

- *We have not had much luck in corresponding formally with other school councils in our jurisdiction, for example, about grants and fundraising, as people seem reluctant to share information.*

- *We have experienced council members who took support courses last year, and a historically active school community.*

- *The most useful council resource sadly is probably availability of casinos for fundraising to support the activities that enrich the school experience for our children.*

Respondents next identified their top three priorities for additional resources or support. Both council members (34.5%) and chairs (43.8%) identify communication with staff or administration as one of their top three. This was listed as a priority by only 12.6% of principals who most commonly chose workshops or training for members (28.2%) as one of their top priorities, compared to 16.8% of council members and 26.2% of chairs. A notably higher percentage of chairs (32.3%) consider additional print and online resources a top priority compared to council members (16.0%) and principals (21.1%). Details on resource priorities are summarized in Table 2.14.

Table 2.14 Priorities for Additional Resources or Support: Principals, Council Chairs and Members

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Staff/ Administration communication/ working relationships (School Board/ District/ Trustees/ Jurisdiction/ Teachers/ Principals/ Administration)	41	34.5	43	12.6	114	43.8
Recruitment of parents for council membership/ Involvement in school/ Council activities	32	26.9	74	21.7	48	18.5
Fundraising efforts/ Financial support	29	24.4	79	23.2	38	14.6
Workshops/ Training for Members (I.e. (Roles/ ASCA/ Training/ Presenter/ Consultant/ Specialist/ How to conduct meetings etc.)	20	16.8	96	28.2	68	26.2
Additional print and online resources (I.e. Templates/ Web resources/ Interactive forums/ Manuals/ Books/ Policy manuals/ Written items/ Condensed version of regulations)	19	16.0	72	21.1	84	32.3
Networking/ Contact with other school councils (I.e. Council of school councils)	18	15.1	59	17.3	67	25.8
Build relationship with community/ Increase community partnerships	14	11.8	9	2.6	12	4.6
Past/ Current council members/ Parents	8	6.7	12	3.5	30	11.5
Alberta Government/ Education/ Government legislation	5	4.2	14	4.1	8	3.1
Other	7	5.9	10	2.9	4	1.5
Not applicable	5	4.2	34	10.0	7	2.7
Don't know	8	6.7	14	4.1	13	5.0
Total	**119**	**100**	**341**	**100**	**260**	**100**

Sample comments regarding resources and support priorities are included below:

- *Process improvement is needed - the council should be copied on pertinent documents without allowing for principal's censor. Greater online access to other councils/information sharing. Smaller handbook (pocket reference) for councils.*

- *An easy to use web site for information. Each chair should have a go to person for questions. Each chair should have a manual to help with duties.*

- *An improved communication plan for our parents via the web. Updates to the ASCA Resource Manual.*

Alberta School Councils' Association Resources

Principals were asked how useful the *Alberta School Council Resource Manual* was to them when working with school councils. As shown in Figure 2.25, most rate this positively with three in ten (30.8%) principals indicating the *Alberta School Council Resource Manual* is very useful, and 51.6% reporting it is somewhat useful. Only 7.4% believe it is not very or not at all useful. Approximately 10% indicated that they did not know and have perhaps not been exposed to it as a resource.

Fig. 2.25 Principals' Rating of Usefulness of ASC Resource Manual
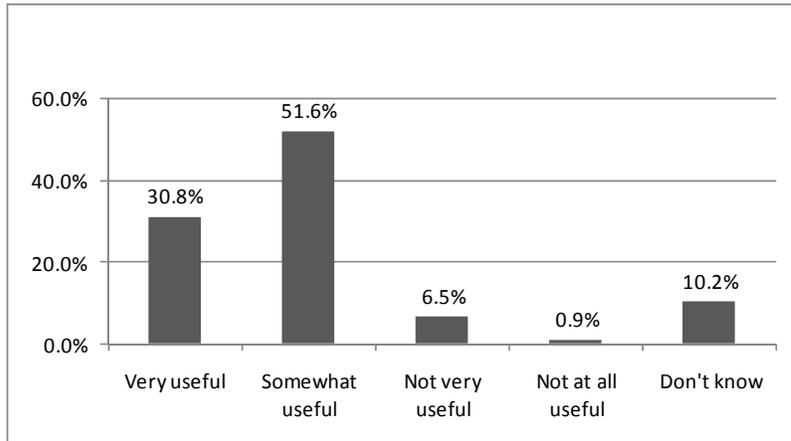
Superintendents and board chairs were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the ASC Resource Manual. Superintendents see the manual notably more useful than do chairpersons, as seen in Figure 2.26 which compares the responses of those two groups.

Figure 2.26 Rating of Usefulness of ASC Resource Manual: Superintendents and Chairs
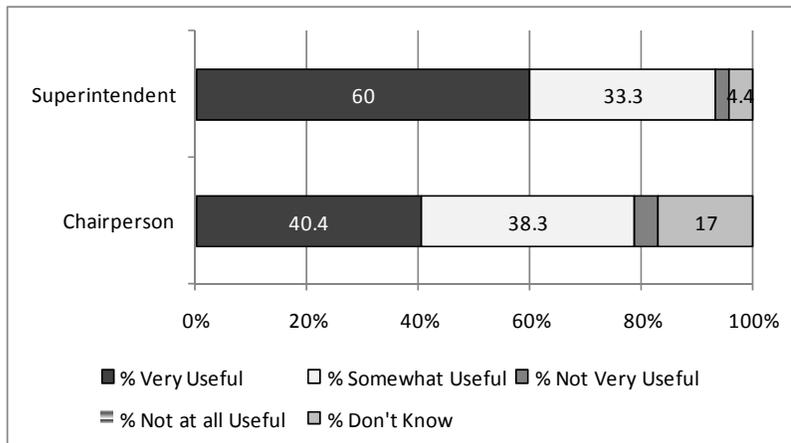
SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES

When council members, chairs and principals were asked to identify the three most important accomplishments of the school council this year, approximately 50% of all respondent groups identified either fundraising or developing school programs and activities to support school initiatives. Although many additional accomplishments were listed by council respondents, as seen in Table 2.15, these were mentioned considerably less frequently and less uniformly across groups.

Table 2.15 Council's Three Most Important Accomplishments

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Fundraising/ Financial support of school initiatives	106	54.6	366	51.8	210	53.0
Developing school programs/ Activities/ General support for school initiatives and student achievement	95	49.0	407	57.6	217	54.8
Developing better/ More effective communication methods	45	23.2	118	16.7	76	19.2
(I.e. Improving relationships with teachers, principals, administrators, school board/ Networking. - schools working together, School Culture and Spirit)	31	16.0	140	19.8	93	23.5
Council Operations (I.e. done by council/ Training accomplished/ Knowledge building/ Operations improvements/ By laws/ Policy development/ Advocacy/ Effective meetings)	28	14.4	99	14.0	74	18.7
Increased input/ Feedback on school operations (Input on accountability pillar)	24	12.4	184	26.0	59	14.9
Increased participation/ Membership (I.e. Attendance/ Participation/ Volunteerism)	17	8.8	134	19.0	94	23.7
Education Planning (I.e. 3-year plan/ School planning/ Student achievement/ Student learning)	10	5.2	71	10.0	38	9.6
Council creation/ Establishing a council	2	1.0	9	1.3	11	2.8
Other	0	0.0	6	0.8	1	0.3
Don't know	7	3.6	6	0.8	2	0.5
Total	**194**	**100**	**707**	**100**	**396**	**100**

Sample responses relating to the council's accomplishments are highlighted below:

- *Paid for and installed a new school playground. Paid for a large painted mural on our gym wall in commemoration of the school's 50th anniversary this year. Had some new parents out to our monthly meetings.*

- *Support of Parent Association group in fundraising for additional technology items and other items not covered by Alberta Education budget. Offering parents various development opportunities based on feedback from monthly feedback sheets. Provision of various cultural activities for all kids at the school, including opera, music and dancing group.*

- *Successfully filled our Executive with a new member; and 2 new members-at-large. Completed annual returns and are current, which were late due to previous council's lack of preparation. Successful fundraising through a dance-a-thon.*

In terms of the challenges the council has overcome in the past year, respondents in all three groups most commonly named recruiting and retaining council members (35.4% of council members, 48.8% of principals and 35.8% of chairs) or encouraging greater parental involvement (23.1% of members, 25.0% of principals and 25.8% of chairs). Principals are notably more likely to have mentioned council membership retention as a challenge than council members or chairs. The need for fundraising was the third most often cited challenge overcome in the views of these respondents.

Table 2.16 Challenges Councils Have Overcome in the Past Year

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Council membership/ Recruiting and retention (I.e. I.e. increasing membership/ Participation at meetings/ Filling council positions/ New members/ Transition of leadership executive positions)	52	35.4	254	48.8	114	35.8
Parental Involvement at School (I.e. Volunteers, involvement of parents of diverse communities, etc)	34	23.1	130	25.0	82	25.8
Establish fundraising activities/ Increase financial support	28	19.0	97	18.6	66	20.8
Increase/ Establish effective communication with parents/ School/ Council/ Community/ Networking collaboration	26	17.7	64	12.3	48	15.1
Conflict resolution	11	7.5	62	11.9	33	10.4
Council Operations (I.e. Bookkeeping/ By-laws/ Succession planning/ Long-term planning/ Goal setting/ Roles and responsibilities)	15	10.2	56	10.7	66	20.8
School Programs/ Initiatives (I.e. Developing / Establishing new school programs/ Assisting school initiatives, policy, safety, health/ Appropriate levels of involvement, organization/ Structure of the school/ School calendars)	15	10.2	40	7.7	42	13.2
Relationships with teachers, board, trustees, district administration/ School culture/climate and Community/image	10	6.8	27	5.2	31	9.7
Running efficient/ Effective meetings	9	6.1	27	5.2	26	8.2
Education Planning (I.e. Data analysis on student achievement/ Issues related to student learning and council's role/ Assessment policies/ Class size issues/ Three Year Education Plans)	7	4.8	24	4.6	23	7.2
Administration Change at school/ Jurisdiction level (I.e. new principal, admin staff, etc.)	11	7.5	22	4.2	25	7.9
Increase school enrollment/ Maintain school	4	2.7	15	2.9	9	2.8
Improving/ Establishing relationships/ Feedback/ Guidance with administration/ Principal	11	7.5	7	1.3	21	6.6
Other	1	0.7	9	1.7	1	0.3
No Challenges	16	10.9	29	5.6	16	5.0
Don't know	5	3.4	3	0.6	5	1.6
Total	**147**	**100**	**521**	**100**	**318**	**100**

Responses from all groups indicate a similar perception of challenges overcome;

- *We have poor attendance at some meetings and meetings that have run too long. We have shortened them up.*

- *Having supportive parents holding the council "positions" is important.*

- *We worked on preschool setup and enrolment policies and have made revisions to hot lunch and other programs for ease of use.*

- *A challenge is obtaining enough volunteers to run the Council.*

- *The resignation of previous year's School Council Chair required establishing trust.*

- *We work toward convincing parents that they can voice an opinion at the meetings and be respected.*

The two challenges most frequently mentioned by respondents as overcome during the past year are also most commonly identified as persisting obstacles: the recruiting and retention of council members and parental involvement at the school. The need for fundraising is perceived as the third ranked continuing challenge. Matters relating to operations, student achievement planning, communications and relationships, and school programming were mentioned much less often in the context of persistent challenges as seen in Table 2.17 which can suggest that they are less of a focus area for councils or that they are not perceived as challenges to the same degree.

Table 2.17 Challenges Councils Continue to Face

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Council Membership/ Recruiting and Retention (I.e. Increasing membership/ Participation/ attendance at meetings/ Filling council positions/ New members/ Transition of leadership executive positions)	95	48.0	328	52.5	216	52.3
Parent involvement at the School (I.e. Volunteers/ Involvement of parents of diverse communities, etc)	92	46.5	251	40.2	177	42.9
Financial support for school and programs/ Modernization/ Playgrounds etc. renovations	50	25.3	122	19.5	100	24.2
(I.e. Bookkeeping/ Budgeting/ By-laws/ Succession planning/ Goal setting/ Policies/ Training/ Roles and responsibilities/ Establishing a Council)	19	9.6	86	13.8	70	16.9
Student Achievement (I.e. Data analysis on student achievement/ Issues related to student learning and council's role/ Assessment policies/ 3-year education plans/ Class size issues)	15	7.6	56	9.0	42	10.2
Increase/ Establish effective communication between parents/ School council/ Community/ Networking collaboration	34	17.2	47	7.5	55	13.3
Running effective council meetings/ Scheduling meetings	7	3.5	41	6.6	10	2.4
Conflict resolution	17	8.6	38	6.1	14	3.4
Other Relationships (I.e. Teachers/ Board/ Trustees/ District administration/ Community or image)	14	7.1	29	4.6	30	7.3
School Programs/ operations (I.e. Developing / establishing new school programs/ Assisting school initiatives/ Policy/ Safety/ Health/ Appropriate levels of involvement/ Organization/ Structure of the school/ School culture/climate/ School calendars)	10	5.1	28	4.5	34	8.2
Stopping declining enrollment/ School closures	9	4.5	20	3.2	30	7.3
Improving/ Establishing relationships/ Feedback/ Guidance with administration/ Principal	22	11.1	9	1.4	47	11.4
Other	3	1.5	5	0.8	1	0.2
None/Nothing	2	1.0	11	1.8	2	0.5
Don't know	2	1.0	2	0.3	1	0.2

Recruitment and retention persist as a challenge. That and other issues are captured in responses below:

- *Our issues include: recruiting new members, and even having parents drop in at meetings. Lack of parent volunteers for activities. Inadequate government funding for textbooks, mild and moderate disabilities.*

- *We have a challenge recruiting parents willing to chair and take on responsibility to lead.*

- *Communication with administration is a challenge.*

- *We need to create decision making activities that benefit students. The council is more than just fundraising.*

Council Effectiveness

Principals, school council chairs and members rate their council's effectiveness this past year in a number of key areas. Principals gave the highest ratings of effectiveness for all areas and council members the lowest.

More than nine in ten principals rated the effectiveness of their council in building relationships with stakeholders as somewhat (24.7%) or very effective (70.1%). Other areas were rated more modestly: 77.2% rated the effectiveness of influencing school priorities for improving student achievement somewhat (56.3%) or very effective (20.9%), and 61.2% rated the effectiveness of the council in playing a meaningful role in jurisdictional improvement processes somewhat (45.5%) or very effective (15.7%). Ratings of effectiveness are seen in Figure 2.27 for each respondent group.

School council chairs also perceived the council as most effective in building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders (93.4% thought it was somewhat or very effective). Two-thirds believe their council has been somewhat or very effective at influencing school priorities for improving student achievement (66.1%) and one half believe they were somewhat or very effective at playing a meaningful role in jurisdiction improvement processes (52.4%).

Members offered slightly lower effectiveness ratings overall. Just over half believe their council has been very effective at building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders (54%) and a further 31.9% believe they have been somewhat effective. Six in ten believe they have been very or somewhat effective at influencing school priorities for improving student achievement and just over 40% believe they have been very or somewhat effective at playing a meaningful role in jurisdiction improvement processes.

Superintendents and board chairs rated the effectiveness of school councils in their jurisdictions during the past year in three specific areas. Although some of this data was reported earlier, it is included again here for comparative purposes. More than three quarters of board chairs and superintendents perceive their school councils as somewhat or very effective.

Figure 2.27 Rating of Council Effectiveness: Principal, Council Chair and Council Member
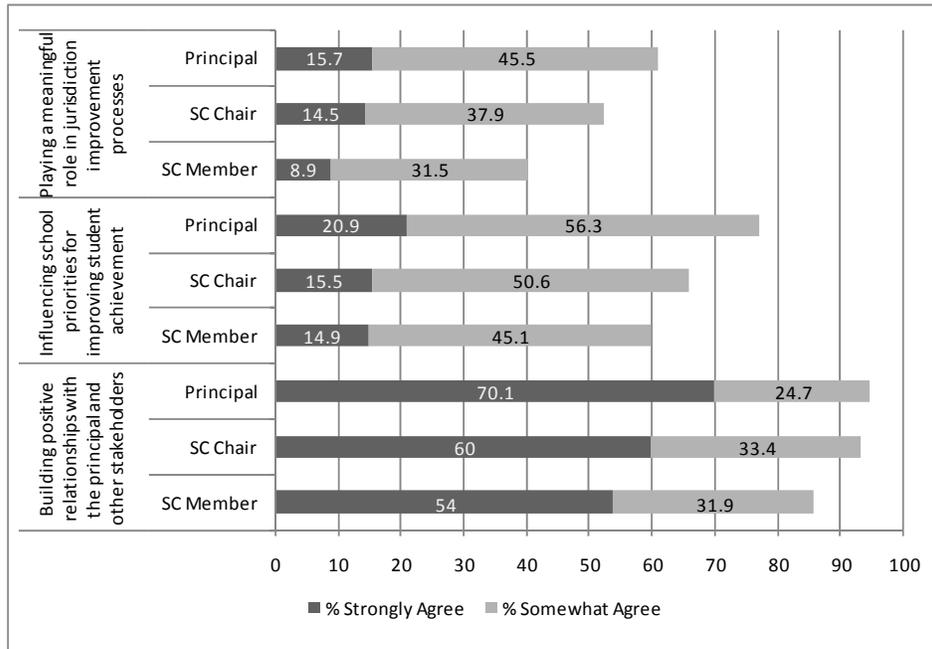
It is interesting to note that school council members and councils perceived their contribution to jurisdiction improvement processes and planning as being quite low with nearly 60% of members indicating that they are not effective or don't know of their impact. Contrarily more than three quarters of board chairs and superintendents state that councils are somewhat or very effective in playing a meaningful role in jurisdiction improvement processes. Superintendent and board chair effectiveness ratings are seen in Figure 2.28.

Figure 2.28 Rating of Council Effectiveness: Superintendent and Board Chair
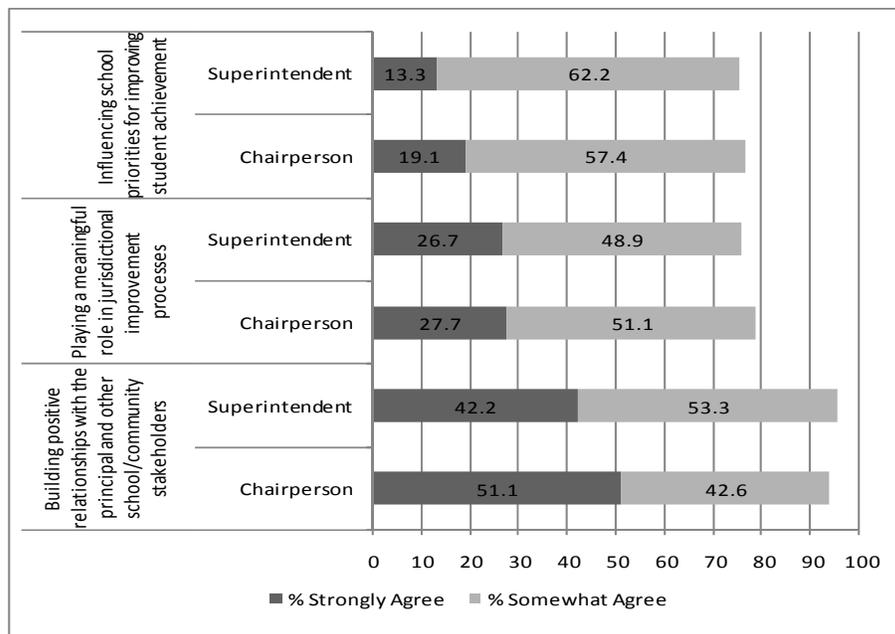
The following chapter of this report will explore some of the differences in perceptions of successes and challenges emerging from the survey findings.

3 Observations and Discussion

There is a discrepancy noted in the views held by school council members, chairs, principals, school board chairs and superintendents. 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, they perhaps are less in touch with the nature of the continued challenges faced by councils in each individual school which are grappling with the demands of recruitment, ensuring diversity of membership, transitioning to a more involved advisory role and forming positive working relationships among the council membership and its community partners. As Alberta school councils continue their evolution towards their legislated mandate, these differences in perspective provide a valuable window on the present state of the field. While findings present a collective snapshot of school councils in 2007/08, it must also be recognized that each individual council is unique, and operates within a distinct school context, development history, and growth potential.

The findings are discussed in the context of the research and a number of key themes that emerge.

THE RESEARCH ON SCHOOL-BASED COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING

The research on collaborative decision-making at the school[4] suggests that it has more potential than traditional top down governance for engaging the talents and energies of all stakeholders in the improvement of student achievement. The capacity building benefits it offers include the power to give principals a new tool for leading and managing change, to engage parents in leveraging the daily efforts of principals and teachers, and to generate broader understanding, more constructive solutions and increased support for school action plans amongst the school community.

The research also makes clear that the results of collaborative decision making at the school level depend upon how well it is implemented. It is a time-consuming and complex process, and one which requires training and support to develop the necessary skills.

The Minister's Review on School Councils (1999) and the subsequent consultation and review (Kaleidoscope, 2004) offered a wealth of advice and recommendations on ways to enhance and improve the effectiveness of school councils in Alberta, noting that the "responsibility for improving effectiveness is a shared responsibility of all stakeholders" (Kaleidoscope, p. 45). It is apparent that many concerted efforts have been made to nurture and strengthen the work of school councils in the four-year period since the Kaleidoscope review.

Many of the fundamental themes raised in these reviews are found in the present survey data. A brief discussion of our findings under seven pertinent themes follows.

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[4] See for example, Barth, 1990; Cameron, 2004; Chen & Chandler, 2001; Collins, 2000; Fullan, 1996; Rubin, 2002; Sheldon, 2003; Wohlstetter, 1997.

CONSULTING WITH THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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?

Survey respondents report they are utilizing a variety of mechanisms for sharing information and gathering input and are also contributing their perspectives on task forces and committees. The most frequent topics of consultation are highly correlated to substantive issues such as school goals and priorities, programs, student achievement, budget, and the three-year plan. As well, councils report being engaged in policy development and review at the school and jurisdiction level. While there is strong agreement among principals, council chairs and members about their engagement in these activities, principals consistently report a higher level of council involvement than do council chairs and members. It would appear that council chairs take the lead in these consultations with the community, as chairs collectively indicate a greater percentage of council time (30%) is spent on consulting/reporting to parents and community than do principals and other council members.

A case may be made for the provision of further resources and support for these community consultations, as responses from all three sets of respondents were somewhat mixed as to whether the council has adequate tools and support for its communication and data collection activities. More than one fifth of council chairs indicate a lack of adequate tools to accomplish this goal, and a similar fraction indicate that developing better communication tools and methods has been one of this year's significant accomplishments.

Overall, in the course of their work, school councils are developing positive relationships with stakeholders in the school, community and jurisdiction. Principals, superintendents and board chairs rate school councils very highly on their effectiveness in executing this responsibility.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PRINCIPAL

Recognition by all stakeholders of the leadership role of the principal as the cornerstone of effective school councils was underlined in the previous provincial school council consultation and review (Kaleidoscope, 2004, p. 46). This is a substantive responsibility, for which the report recommended the jurisdiction provide mentoring, coaching and identify accountability mechanisms.

The 2008 data indicate that 61% of principals report being provided with opportunities to acquire effective strategies for working with their school council, primarily through such means as networking, workshops, and jurisdiction developed resources. This would suggest there is room for more efforts on the part of some jurisdictions to provide support in this regard.

The over-arching recommendation of the Kaleidoscope review (2004, p.6) was the recommendation to build the strong and effective relationships which are critical to the success of school councils. This report noted that "finding ways and remembering to involve councils in matters of significance is a challenge to some principals". Principals were advised to use varied avenues to gather input, to be very clear on the roles and responsibilities and established goals of the council, and to work at maintaining constant and open communication and building trusting relationships with council.

The 2008 data show that on average principals report devoting 9% of their time to working with the school council, with the most frequently reported type of activity (32%) being receiving advice from the council. Perceptions differ on the nature of this interaction, however, with principal views regarding council's active involvement in the school's Three Year Plan consistently much higher than those of council chairs and members (see Table 2.7). Where 60% of principals, for example, reported that their council provided feedback and recommendations on the draft plan, about 37% of council members and chairs reported this type of involvement. There were similar sharp contrasts between principals and the other two sets of respondents with respect to consultation during the development of the school plan (45% vs. 20%) and advising on the initiatives in the plan (51% compared to 19%). If councils are to have greater focus on student achievement and school improvement, these gaps in perceived meaningful involvement bear closer examination.

The 2008 data suggest there is a need for continued efforts to strengthen communications between principals and their council chairs and members. It is encouraging that more than one half of council members (60%) and chairs (54%) believe their council has been very effective in building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders, yet this question was too broad to isolate the strength of their relationship with the principal. A third of school council chairs indicated the principal was their most important resource, suggesting a positive and constructive working relationship. However, when asked to identify their top three priorities for additional resources or support, a large number of council chairs (44%) and members (35%) identified communication with administration and staff. From this it may be inferred that additional efforts are needed to keep communication channels open. And, in identifying their priority goals, 18% of council chairs cited improving or establishing relationships with the principal. This is reinforced by the more than 11% of council chairs/members who cited improving or establishing relationships with the principal as on ongoing challenge faced by the council.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

The most recent provincial regulations on school councils (2007) articulate the expectation that their work should have a greater focus on student achievement. The 2008 survey data indicate that a majority of school councils are involved in providing advice on school improvement planning, albeit in varying degrees of intensity. Both jurisdiction and school level respondents concur that councils are being provided with student achievement data, primarily through the principal, and that this information is satisfactorily explained. Along the continuum of "providing advice" on the school's Three Year Education Plan and annual results report, the most common forms of council involvement are at the receptive level: "explanation and discussion of the completed plan" and "reviewing student achievement data".

As noted above, there is a significant discrepancy between the views of principals and 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. This might be because principals interpret the input of the school council as being of value to planning and decision making, but the council may not be aware of how that input is being incorporated. It is also possible that principals perceive the advice of school councils as being sufficient in scope, yet council chairs and members may feel that they would like to have more input on these issues but lack the avenues and opportunity to provide it. This relates to one of the conditions for the success of site-based decision making: the power to

influence decisions. Consequently, if councils are to carry out their mandate with respect to focusing on educational planning for student achievement, greater clarity on and training to support this role would be desirable for principals, council chairs and members. In particular, this training should focus on building capacity and opportunities for councils to contribute at the formative stages of the school's Three Year Plan.

The most commonly cited activities undertaken by councils to support their school's Three Year Educational Plan are providing information to parents about the plan, suggesting activities to support its goals, and fundraising to support specific initiatives. Once again, principals report these activities being undertaken at almost twice the frequency of council members.

Finally, school councils have the option of developing their own Three Year Plans to support the school's Three Year Plan. The 2008 survey data suggest that less than 18% of councils have established such a plan. As more councils become comfortable with their role as advisors in the school or jurisdictional Three Year Plans, they may begin to see value in undertaking their own plans. However, this is an activity currently associated with more experienced councils. Where council Three Year Plans are in place, more than three-quarters of these councils evaluate their own plan annually. It would be important to study the impact of these aligned Three Year Plans on school council effectiveness in considering whether this practice should be more widely encouraged.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Sheldon (2003) notes that meaningful parent/community involvement in "school-based management does not happen by itself, but must be planned for, trained for, and resourced." In recognition of the continuous turnover on school councils and the need for building capacity to perform an expanded role, more systematic efforts to deliver school council training and development were initiated in 2004 with the first workshops delivered in 2005; however, prior to that time, skill development sessions were delivered by ASCA, in a more fragmented piecemeal manner. The funding for a program of School Council Development enabled a coordinated approach to workshop development and delivery. It is evident from the survey that this training is valued along with the School Council Resource Manual and additional resources provided at the jurisdictional level.

Stakeholders express the greatest need for training in four areas: recruitment and retention of members/parental involvement; roles and responsibilities of councils; leadership/governance and long-term planning; and relationship building. The workshops offered in the School Council Development (SCD) program cover two of these topics (recruitment, and roles), as well as educational planning and the differences between councils and fundraising societies. The SCD workshops received high ratings for usefulness from most participants, with somewhat lower evaluations for the educational planning workshop. It may be useful for ASCA to consider redesigning the educational planning workshop and adding two new training modules (leadership/governance/long-term planning and relationship building) to address the needs expressed by the field. Jurisdictions could consider how to strengthen their capacity building efforts by localizing the content, organization, and strategies for council training activities.

There are 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. That being said, participation rates in the SCD workshops, at least among survey respondents, were modest: council chairs (17%), principals (13%) and members (7%). While it would appear a much larger number of principals (61%) have opportunities to acquire training for working with school councils, the survey did not ask about participation which would have provided comparative data.

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

RECRUITING MEMBERS

Clearly, recruiting a sufficient number of council members remains a widespread challenge seen in the current survey data and the previous Kaleidoscope review (2004). Recruiting and retaining membership was the most commonly mentioned challenge overcome in the previous year, but it was also mentioned by approximately half of members, chairs and principals as the primary ongoing challenge, along with transition of leadership positions. Increased participation and membership was mentioned as a significant accomplishment by only 8.8% of members, 13.4% of chairs and 23.7% of principals. In discussing school council resources, the least available resource mentioned was access to sufficient members to carry out the work of the council. School council chairs indicated this most strongly, with slightly more than half perceiving this to be a problem. Challenges to greater participation are highlighted in the following comments from the survey respondents.

> *People are very busy in this booming Alberta economy. It is a challenge to get volunteers for council positions and to get people to come out to the meetings.*

> *We have a culturally diverse population and not everyone may put the same sort of value on participation in a School Council group. By high school many parents believe they should be "hands off" when it comes to their child's schooling.*

Representation on school councils was highlighted as an issue in the earlier research (Kaleidoscope 2004), which recognized that a limited number of parents are interested in investing time on a regular basis on school council activities (p. 25). This gives rise to concerns related to the limited number of parents speaking for the whole community on significant policy issues, and the need to ensure that consultation on such matters occurs with the whole school community. According to this study, it appears that a significant amount of time is devoted to consultation and that it is occurring regularly. Research into levels and types of engagement of the wider school community with school councils would shed light on effective practices in this area.

In the 2004 Kaleidoscope study, principals reported that continuity of parent membership was a challenge, with large and frequent turnover resulting in the need to start over and redevelop relationships (p.15). The Alberta School Councils Resource Manual (ASCRM, Revised 2007) points to the need for developing and implementing procedures to create an environment of inclusion and involvement for new members, along with orientation, mentoring and the provision of resources for new members. As well as the induction of new members, planning for continuity and succession is also seen as an important step.

The 2008 survey results show that principals, council members and chairs rate experienced members as a highly valued resource for the success of the council. This was mentioned by nearly half of school council members. Members and chairs with greater experience are also more likely to have been exposed to some training as highlighted in the quote below and are seen as a valuable asset to the council:

> *We have experienced council members who took support courses last year and are historically active in the school community* (Council Member).

Since membership of parents and community members on a council will shift on a yearly basis, further training directed at principals, chairs and teachers in mentoring and supporting new members may have merit.

COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS

> *It is important for all organizations to periodically discuss and evaluate their activities and performance. School councils are no exception. Research in Chicago and several Canadian provinces has provided some characteristics of effective school councils which are as follows:*

> - *They focus on student learning and the best interests of all students*
> - *They are actively involved in setting school priorities for improving student achievement*
> - *They promote meaningful parental and community involvement*
> - *They have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities*
> - *They keep well-informed about school and board policies and procedures*
> - *They have clear and consistent processes for decision-making*
> - *They communicate with the community about their activities and actively seek its views*
> - *They establish priorities and goals and stick to them* (Georgia School Council Guidebook, 2007.Section 5.35).

These attributes suggest a number of lenses for the ongoing examination of school council effectiveness. The 2008 survey data captured information concerning many of these qualities of effective school councils. We briefly highlight the evidence here, beginning with respondents' ratings of their effectiveness against three given criteria.

Ratings of Effectiveness

All five respondent groups were asked to rate council effectiveness during the past year on three specific criteria. Principals were asked one additional question relative to council effectiveness. For clarity, the "somewhat effective" category has not been included in this summary. Only the "very effective" responses are reported here.

Council effectiveness in *building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders* is rated the 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.

Ratings for *influencing school priorities for improving student achievement* were not as robust. Only 21% of principals, 16% of council chairs, and 15% of council members perceived their councils as "very effective" in this area. At the jurisdiction level, superintendents (13%) and chairs (19%) held corresponding views of the level of council effectiveness in this regard. The previously noted gap in principal and council chair/member perceptions of the degree of meaningful involvement in the development of and advising on the school Three Year Plan may be a significant factor in this outcome. So, too, might be the finding that the SCD training workshop rated as least informative was the workshop on Educational Planning, or that fewer than 7% of council members participated in any training workshops this year. As participation in the educational planning process is an expectation of councils under the revised provincial regulation and their active involvement in setting school priorities for improving student achievement is an indicator of effectiveness, these results warrant further study to identify existing barriers and provide the necessary supports to strengthen the influence of school councils in this domain.

Assessments of council effectiveness were mixed on the question of *playing a meaningful role in jurisdiction improvement processes.* At the school level, this impact was not highly rated by principals or council chairs (15%), and members (4%). On the other hand, 42% of superintendents and 28% of chairpersons assessed their councils' collective impact on jurisdiction improvement processes as "very effective". One plausible explanation for this difference in perspectives may be the degree of information available to school-based respondents for assessing their influence at the jurisdiction level. This might suggest the merit of strengthening the voice of and communications with an umbrella school council body (Council of School Councils) in order to make this contribution to jurisdiction planning more explicit. As individual school councils presently have difficulty perceiving the impact of their efforts at the jurisdiction level, this should be identified as an area for growth.

In a separate question, principals were asked to rate their council's effectiveness in *supporting student achievement at the school*. Three in ten principals (30%) gave the "very effective rating". This somewhat higher rating for this more global assessment of council impact on student achievement as compared to the narrower question on 'influencing priorities for student achievement' (21%) above is encouraging and bears monitoring over time.

Other Indicators of Effectiveness

Other data gathered in this survey provide some additional ways of assessing school council effectiveness. Here we briefly consider the information from principals, council chairs and members on their priorities, how they allocate their time, and their most important accomplishments for further insights regarding their effectiveness.

Council Priorities

The stated top priorities of council participants are revealing when considered in the light of the attributes of effective councils. Principals, council chairs and members were united in citing parental involvement and communications activities as their second top priority. However, while principals most commonly mentioned supporting student achievement as council's dominant priority, school council chairs and members listed fundraising as a priority almost twice as frequently as they listed supporting student achievement. This suggests the need for continued training and acculturation on the strengthened mandate for school councils and the differences between council roles and responsibilities and those of fundraising societies.

Allocation of Time

The way in which councils and council members spend their time is also revealing of their priorities, and ultimately, their effectiveness. Principals report the largest portion of their time (32%) is devoted to receiving advice from council, while council chairs/members report 24% of council time is spent on providing this advice. Council chairs indicate that the largest portion of time (30%) is spent on consulting with or reporting to the community, while members assess this to be 24%. Notably, these consultations (see Figure 2.5) were most commonly related to school goals and priorities, programs, and student achievement. Once again, however, fundraising activities were also prominent in how councils spend their time, with principals, chairs and members reporting 24-27% of council time devoted to this. Emphases on planning for improving student achievement and on communicating with the school and community about this are among the characteristics of effective councils; a focus on fundraising is not.

Most Important Accomplishments

Principal, chair and council member views of their council's most important accomplishments during the past years provide another indirect gauge of council effectiveness. In open-ended responses without prompts, all three sets of respondents identified fundraising in support of school initiatives (52-55%) and developing/supporting school programs and initiatives including student achievement (49-58%) as their most highly-rated accomplishments. Responses relating to these two topics occurred twice as frequently as those that could be clustered into a third category, improving communication methods. Specific references to three-year education planning or improving student achievement/learning comprised between 5-10% of responses from the three sets of stakeholders. From this it might be assumed that continued training in support of the new expectations for council's role is desirable.

FUNDRAISING

It is apparent that many Alberta school councils maintain a prominent focus on fundraising, despite their mandate to provide advice on school improvement. To recap the 2008 findings:

- principals, chairs and members indicate between 24-27% of council time is devoted to fundraising
- 55% of council members and 46% of council chairs indicate fundraising is their top priority; 47% of principals cited fundraising as the second highest council priority
- 55% of members, 52% of principals and 53% of council chairs list fundraising as the most or second most important accomplishment of council in the past year

As School Council Development (SCD) workshops are available regarding the differences in roles between councils and fundraising societies and these have been rated as informative by participants, it would seem important to continue and expand the reach of this aspect of council training.

SUMMARY

Alberta's school councils are demonstrating a growing role in the education system. Their success in representing and communicating with the community on educational priorities is acknowledged by all, as are the positive relationships they have forged with their principals and school and community stakeholders. School councils are providing advice on educational planning and seeking an ever more meaningful role in this process at both the school and jurisdiction level. There is an identified need for continuous training and development to assist councils to fulfill their role in educational planning. Many councils are challenged with recruitment and retention of members. A significant number of councils are transitioning from their historic role as fundraisers towards a shared responsibility for student achievement. There is much to celebrate and much to strive for in the journey of school councils towards efficacy in their mandated role as key advisors to principals and boards. This baseline survey will provide a useful benchmark against which to measure their continued development and progress going forward.

4 Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to quantify stakeholder perceptions regarding the operations and effectiveness of Alberta's school councils and to determine how well the training and development initiative commenced in 2005 is meeting the needs of those involved in their work. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The efficacy of school councils will be enhanced through the efforts of all stakeholders to:

1. Create opportunities for meaningful involvement in educational planning.

Participation in the educational planning process is an expectation of councils under the provincial regulation, and their active involvement in advising principals, and setting school priorities for improving student achievement is an indicator of effectiveness. School principals and jurisdictions must identify and remove barriers to school council participation in this process and provide the necessary supports to strengthen their influence. In turn, council members must re-examine their priorities to make space for participating more fully in this shared responsibility.

2. Strengthen communication between principals and councils.

There is a need for continued efforts to strengthen communications between principals and their council chairs and members and to keep communication channels open. In particular, jurisdictions whose principals reported no opportunities (25%) or being unaware of opportunities (15%) to acquire effective strategies for working with school councils, should ensure that systematic coaching in this important role is made available to principals.

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

There is evidence that knowledge and skills are being transferred to participants in the SCD training workshops and that these training and development modules are relevant to the field. The training and acculturation for school council members across the province should be continued and expanded in the following ways:

- A priority should be placed on training with respect to school council involvement in educational planning processes. The current training module could be redesigned to build understandings of the council's role and, in particular, the capacity to contribute at the formative stages of the school's Three Year Education Plan. This training must be supported by actions at the school and jurisdiction level to identify existing barriers and provide the necessary supports to strengthen the influence of school councils in educational planning.

- Continued education on the separation of the work of councils and fundraising bodies remains vital. The existing SCD workshop on this topic could be reinforced by the development of explicit policies at the jurisdiction level related to the role of school councils with respect to fundraising.

- The ASCA should consider adding two new training modules to address needs expressed by the field: 1) Leadership, governance, and long-term planning and 2) Relationship building.

- Local jurisdictions, in conjunction with the ASCA, should consider how to strengthen their capacity building efforts by localizing the content, organization, and strategies for council training activities.

4. Increase council impact at the jurisdiction level.

As individual school councils presently have difficulty perceiving the impact of their efforts at the jurisdiction level, this is identified as an area for growth. Jurisdictions should take steps to strengthen the voice of and communications with an umbrella school council body (Council of School Councils) in order to make the contribution of school councils to jurisdiction improvement planning more explicit.

5. Address the challenge of council membership.

Recruiting a sufficient number of council members remains a widespread challenge. The ASCA in conjunction with its provincial partners may wish to consider an awareness program to raise the profile of school councils in the school and community at large, with the specific goal of reaching a broader audience of potential council members. Efforts must also continue at the system and local level to provide formal support for the orientation and mentoring of new members and to buttress leadership and succession planning within councils. Those jurisdictions not making use of the School Council Resource Manual and other ASCA resources at the local level should be encouraged to do so.

6. Expand communication and network building among councils.

Councils will benefit from further opportunities to collaborate with other councils, exchange effective strategies, and assess their influence at the jurisdiction and provincial level. This can be accomplished through enhanced regional and local networking, stronger umbrella organizations (Council of School Councils) at the jurisdiction level, and increased use of email and internet communications and delivery of professional development bulletins. The ASCA could play a larger role in coordinating such activities through its well-developed website.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this report have offered a number of insights into the work and impact of school councils in the Alberta school system. Additional research could be beneficial in a number of specific areas such as these and others to help identify best practices:

- The 2008 survey data suggest that less than 18% of councils have developed their own optional Three Year Plans to support the school's Three Year Education Plan. As councils which are more familiar and comfortable with advising on student achievement

planning are also more likely to develop their own Three Year Plans, support for councils which appear to be high-functioning to take this next step may be worth considering. The impact of aligned three-year plans on school council effectiveness should be studied in considering whether this practice should be more widely encouraged.

- 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 educational planning.

- 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.

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.

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APPENDIX

Supplementary Data

Table A.1 Mode of Response

Group	Data Collection Method	Total Complete	Percentage of Total
Principal	Fax	9	1.1%
	Phone	85	10.5%
	Online	719	88.4%
	Total	**813**	100.0%
School Council Chair	Fax	10	2.1%
	Phone	10	2.1%
	Online	450	95.7%
	Total	**470**	100.0%
School Council Member	Fax	10	4.3%
	Phone	0	0.0%
	Online	225	95.7%
	Total	**235**	100.0%
Superintendent	Fax	14	31%
	Phone	8	17.8%
	Online	23	51.1%
	Total	**45**	100.0%
Chairperson	Fax	6	12.8%
	Phone	12	25.5%
	Online	29	61.7%
	Total	**47**	100.0%

Figure A.1 School Enrollment as Reported by Council Chairs, Members and Principals
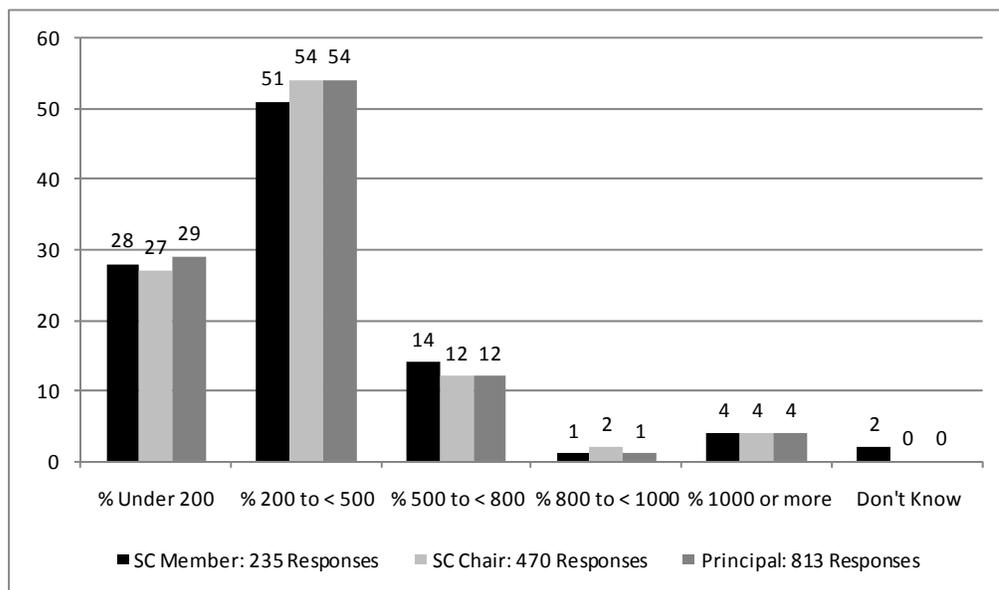
Table A.2 Distribution of Respondents Chairs-Members-Principals

School Division	# of Respondents		
	School Council Member	Principal	School Council Chair
Aspen View Regional Division No. 19	3	10	6
Battle River Regional Division No. 31	5	16	9
Black Gold Regional Division No. 18	5	19	11
Buffalo Trail Public Schools Regional Division No. 28	3	15	5
Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 1	6	24	13
Calgary School District No. 19	36	89	60
Canadian Rockies Regional Division No. 12	1	8	2
Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73	3	18	8
Christ the Redeemer Catholic Separate Division No. 3	3	6	6
Clearview School Division No. 71	3	7	1
East Central Alberta Catholic Separate Schools Regional Division No. 16	0	4	2
East Central Francophone Education Region No. 3	0	0	0
Edmonton Catholic Separate School District No. 7	15	49	24
Edmonton School District No. 7	35	108	63
Elk Island Catholic Separate Regional∗ Division No. 41	5	10	9
Elk Island Public Schools Regional Division No. 14	4	32	13
Evergreen Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 2	3	7	4
Foothills School Division No. 38	4	15	8
Fort McMurray Public School District No.∗ 2833	3	6	6
Fort McMurray Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 32	1	5	5
Fort Vermilion School Division No. 52	2	11	5
Golden Hills School Division No. 75	1	8	5
Grande Prairie Roman Catholic Separate∗ School District No. 28	3	5	5
Grande Prairie School District No. 2357	3	8	6

School Division	# of Respondents		
	School Council Member	Principal	School Council Chair
Grande Yellowhead Regional Division No. 35	4	16	5
Grasslands Regional Division No. 6	3	10	4
Greater North Central Francophone Education Region No. 2	0	0	0
Greater Southern Public Francophone Education Region No. 4	0	1	0
Greater Southern Separate Catholic Francophone Education Region No. 4	0	0	0
Greater St. Albert Catholic Regional Division No. 29	2	13	3
High Prairie School Division No. 48	1	7	4
Holy Family Catholic Regional Division No. 37	2	4	5
Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 4	4	7	4
Horizon School Division No. 67	4	17	11
Lakeland Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 150	1	6	4
Lethbridge School District No. 51	3	11	5
Living Waters Catholic Regional Division No. 42	2	3	3
Livingstone Range School Division No. 68	3	11	5
Lloydminster Public School Division	0	0	0
Lloydminster Roman Catholic Separate School Division	0	0	0
Medicine Hat Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 20	3	8	4
Medicine Hat School District No. 76	1	8	9
Northern Gateway Regional Division No. 10	2	13	6
Northern Lights School Division No. 69	6	19	8
Northland School Division No. 61	0	1	0
Northwest Francophone Education Region No. 1	0	0	0
Palliser Regional Division No. 26	2	10	9
Parkland School Division No. 70	6	11	13
Peace River School Division No. 10	2	10	4
Peace Wapiti School Division No. 76	5	16	10
Pembina Hills Regional Division No. 7	2	10	4
Prairie Land Regional Division No.25	1	6	4
Prairie Rose School Division No. 8	1	13	6
Red Deer Catholic Regional Division No. 39	5	5	5
Red Deer Public School District No. 104	2	11	4
Rocky View School Division No. 41	6	21	11
St. Albert Protestant Separate School District No. 6	3	9	6
St. Paul Education Regional Division No. 1	1	11	2
St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Separate Regional Division No. 38	1	4	3
Sturgeon School Division No. 24	2	7	10
Westwind School Division No. 74	2	8	2
Wetaskiwin Regional Division No. 11	3	9	8
Wild Rose School Division No. 66	0	5	1
Wolf Creek School Division No. 72	3	12	12
	235	**813**	**470**

Table A.3 Time Spent by Councils on Various Activities: Principal

Principal	Providing advice to the school principal	Providing advice to the division	Consulting/ reporting to parents & community	Workshops and training	Networking with other school councils	Fundraising	Other
None	3.2%	39.9%	9.2%	60.9%	52.9%	26.1%	77.9%
25% or less	48.5%	58.0%	60.6%	37.8%	46.3%	35.8%	11.8%
26% to 50%	32.7%	2.0%	24.8%	0.8%	0.8%	25.7%	7.5%
51% to 75%	11.0%	0.0%	3.8%	0.1%	0.0%	9.6%	1.8%
76% to 100%	4.5%	0.1%	1.6%	0.3%	0.0%	2.8%	1.0%
Average	**32%**	**6%**	**22%**	**4%**	**4%**	**25%**	**7%**

Table A.4 Time Spent by Councils on Various Activities: Council Chairs

School Council Chair	Providing advice to the school principal	Providing advice to the division	Consulting/ reporting to parents & community	Workshops and training	Networking with other school councils	Fundraising	Other
None	6.0%	45.3%	4.1%	63.4%	46.5%	26.5%	74.0%
25% or less	62.2%	52.5%	49.2%	34.9%	52.3%	35.2%	14.5%
26% to 50%	23.9%	1.9%	34.2%	1.7%	1.2%	28.2%	8.0%
51% to 75%	4.8%	0.2%	9.4%	0.0%	0.0%	7.7%	2.4%
76% to 100%	3.1%	0.0%	3.1%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%	1.2%
Average	**24%**	**6%**	**30%**	**4%**	**5%**	**24%**	**8%**

Table A.5 Time Spent by Councils on Various Activities: Council Members

School Council Member	Providing advice to the school principal	Providing advice to the division	Consulting/ reporting to parents & community	Workshops and training	Networking with other school councils	Fundraising	Other
None	8.1%	50.5%	9.7%	66.7%	55.4%	19.9%	71.5%
25% or less	57.0%	46.8%	57.0%	32.3%	42.5%	35.5%	11.3%
26% to 50%	29.0%	1.6%	26.3%	1.1%	1.6%	30.1%	11.3%
51% to 75%	3.8%	0.5%	6.5%	0.0%	0.0%	8.1%	3.2%
76% to 100%	2.2%	0.5%	0.5%	0.0%	0.5%	6.5%	2.7%
Average	**23%**	**6%**	**24%**	**4%**	**5%**	**27%**	**10%**

Table A.6 Goals and Priorities: Principal, Chair, Members

Description	School Council Chair Total #	% of Responses
Establish fundraising activities/ Increase financial support (I.e. Funding for resources, playground, Field trips, Extracurricular, arts and culture, etc.)	175	46.2%
Increase/ Establish effective communication/ Provide information/ Parent education/ Community outreach/ Advocacy/ Surveys, etc.	139	36.7%
Increase/ Encourage parental involvement in school/ Council	138	36.4%
Support student achievement (Education, academics)	116	30.6%
Enhancing school spirit/ Community building/ Teacher support/ Catholicity/ Values/ Citizenship	98	25.9%

Description	Total #	% of Responses
Develop safe and healthy school for all students (I.e. Fitness, nutrition, safety, etc.)	68	17.9%
Improve/ Establish relationships/ Feedback/ Guidance with administration/ Principal	68	17.9%
Governance (I.e. Establish regulations/ Council operations/ Run smoothly/ SMART goals/Policies/ Planning)	58	15.3%
Enrollment issues (Attendance, staffing, declining numbers, space/ Building/ Transportation issues.)	38	10.0%
Increase technology/ Smart-board use in classroom	32	8.4%
Increase/ Establish long-range/ Three-year plans for school/ Council/ Jurisdiction	26	6.9%
Support literacy/ Reading programs/ Library enhancement	25	6.6%
Other	8	2.1%
No goals/ Priorities established	1	0.3%

Description	School Council Member	
	Total #	% of Responses
Establish fundraising activities/ Increase financial support (I.e. Funding for resources, playground, Field trips, Extracurricular, arts and culture, etc.)	97	54.8%
Increase/ Encourage parental involvement in school/ Council	54	30.5%
Increase/ Establish effective communication/ Provide information/ Parent education/ Community outreach/ Advocacy/ Surveys, etc.	51	28.8%
Develop safe and healthy school for all students (I.e. Fitness, nutrition, safety, etc.)	46	26.0%
Support student achievement (Education, academics)	44	24.9%
Enhancing school spirit/ Community building/ Teacher support/ Catholicity/ Values/ Citizenship	37	20.9%
Governance (I.e. Establish regulations/ Council operations/ Run smoothly/ SMART goals/Policies/ Planning)	27	15.3%
Improve/ Establish relationships/ Feedback/ Guidance with administration/ Principal	20	11.3%
Increase technology/ Smart-board use in classroom	18	10.2%
Support literacy/ Reading programs/ Library enhancement	11	6.2%
No goals/ Priorities established	10	5.6%
Enrollment issues (Attendance, staffing, declining numbers, space/ Building/ Transportation issues.)	8	4.5%
Increase/ Establish long-range/ Three-year plans for school/ Council/ Jurisdiction	5	2.8%
Other	1	0.6%

Description	Principal	
	Total #	% of Responses
Support student achievement (Education, academics)	329	51.2%
Establish fundraising activities/ Increase financial support (I.e. Funding for resources, playground, Field trips, Extracurricular, arts and culture, etc.)	303	47.2%
Increase/ Establish effective communication/ Provide information/ Parent education/ Community outreach/ Advocacy/ Surveys, etc.	167	26.0%
Enhancing school spirit/ Community building/ Teacher support/ Catholicity/ Values/ Citizenship	140	21.8%
Increase/ Encourage parental involvement in school/ Council	136	21.2%

Develop safe and healthy school for all students (I.e. Fitness, nutrition, safety, etc.)	130	20.2%
Improve/ Establish relationships/ Feedback/ Guidance with administration/ Principal	98	15.3%
Governance (I.e. Establish regulations/ Council operations/ Run smoothly/ SMART goals/Policies/ Planning)	67	10.4%
Increase technology/ Smart-board use in classroom	55	8.6%
Increase/ Establish long-range/ Three-year plans for school/ Council/ Jurisdiction	50	7.8%
Support literacy/ Reading programs/ Library enhancement	42	6.5%
Enrollment issues (Attendance, staffing, declining numbers, space/ Building/ Transportation issues.)	27	4.2%
Other	6	0.9%
No goals/ Priorities established	5	0.8%

Table A.7 Summary of Priority Goals for Principals, Council Members and Chairs

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Establish fundraising activities/ Increase financial support (I.e. Funding for resources, playground, Field trips, Extracurricular, arts and culture, etc.)	97	54.8	303	47.2	175	46.2
Increase/ Encourage parental involvement in school/ Council	54	30.5	136	21.2	138	36.4
Increase/ Establish effective communication/ Provide information/ Parent education/ Community outreach/ Advocacy/ Surveys, etc.	51	28.8	167	26.0	139	36.7
Develop safe and healthy school for all students (I.e. Fitness, nutrition, safety, etc.)	46	26.0	130	20.2	68	17.9
Support student achievement (Education, academics)	44	24.9	329	51.2	116	30.6

Additional Comments Gathered

A total of 423 respondents provided additional comments on a wide variety of topics, including 65 school council members, 210 principals and 148 chairs. Both school council members and chairs most commonly commented that they need to find ways to increase parent involvement in the school and council and while this was also commonly mentioned by principals, they were most likely to indicate the council has had a successful year.

Table A.8 Closing Remarks: Principal, Chair, Members

Description	School Council Member		Principal		School Council Chair	
	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses	Total #	% of Responses
Need to find ways to increase parent involvement in the school/ Council	22	33.3	70	30.2	36	24.3
Need to define role and duties of the School Council	20	30.3	40	17.2	17	11.5
Survey comments	17	25.8	38	16.4	31	20.9
Need to improve working relationship between council and administration/ Board	15	22.7	3	1.3	24	16.2
Council has had a successful/ Enjoyable year/ Accomplished goals	15	22.7	71	30.6	24	16.2
Council has been ineffective/ Unable to reach goals	12	18.2	22	9.5	15	10.1
Council has been supported by all levels of school (I.e. Teachers, Administration, etc.)	10	15.2	25	10.8	15	10.1
Funding issues and funding allocation take a significant amount of council's time	7	10.6	11	4.7	11	7.4
Need for leadership in the council	4	6.1	6	2.6	6	4.1
ASCA is a valuable resource for school councils	4	6.1	3	1.3	9	6.1
Need for training/workshops	2	3.0	10	4.3	13	8.8
Other	1	1.5	5	2.2	7	4.7
Total	**65**	**100**	**210**	**100**	**148**	**100**

Respondents' were asked to provide additional comments on any aspects not previously covered in the survey. A variety of issues were raised as highlighted in the selected responses below:

- *Our school councils are primarily made up of staff who have children at our school. What we need is a way to bring parents from the community to become active. I know this is a problem with a lot of different councils around the area. We do have a great community support and the staff at the school is wonderful, we just need more involvement.*

- *Our school district is very open to parent involvement but our school administration would still rather provide information than encourage consultation.*

- *Parents are so busy these days in the urban areas that School Councils seem to be forgotten unless there is a problem such as 'bullying' that brings parents out. Principals are overwhelmed and our Board administration is unwilling to deal with principals honestly or parents. Board administration is intimidating and elected Board members rely much too heavily on administration to provide them with answers.*

- *People are very busy in this booming Alberta economy. Challenges to get volunteers for council positions and to get people to come out to the meetings. Try other methods of communications to keep people informed, e-mail, newsletters, School Zone, etc. People in general are putting in more time at their jobs. We have a culturally diverse population and not everyone may put the same sort of value on participation in a School Council group. By high school many parents believe they should be "hands off" when it comes to their child's schooling.*

- *Our school council has an excellent relationship with the Administration and parents come out to be involved, have input and find out what is happening. There is also an emphasis on "parenting of teens" which many people find helpful at this difficult stage.*

Alberta School Councils Survey
Spring 2008

Your participation in this survey commissioned by the Alberta Home and School Councils Association will provide useful information for the ongoing development and support of school councils. The data is being collected by an independent survey firm, and all responses are strictly confidential. A provincial report on the findings will be available to individual school councils, School Divisions, education partner organizations, and Alberta Education in September 2008.

PART I   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

School Name _____

A1. What is your position on council?

- ○   Principal
- ○   Teacher
- ○   Parent
- ○   Community Member
- ○   Student Member

A2. Are you the current chair?

- ○   Yes
- ○   No

A3. How long have you been on this council?

- ○   Less than 1 year
- ○   1 year to less than 2 years
- ○   2 years to less than 3 years
- ○   3 or more years

A4. How many total years of experience do you have on any school council?

- ○   Less than 1 year
- ○   1 year to less than 2 years
- ○   2 years to less than 3 years
- ○   3 or more years

A5. Please select the category that best describes your school:

- ○   K-3
- ○   K-6
- ○   K-9
- ○   K-12
- ○   6-9
- ○   8-12
- ○   7-9
- ○   10-12
- ○   Other (please specify) _____

A6. Which of the following best describes your school enrolment?

- ○   Under 200
- ○   200 to less than 500
- ○   500 to less than 800
- ○   800 to less than 1000
- ○   1000 or more
- ○   Don't know

A7. Please indicate your school division.

_____

PART III   TRAINING and DEVELOPMENT

1. Did your council participate in one or more School Council Development training workshops this year?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Don't know

2. Did you personally participate in council training workshop(s) this year?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

If "No", please proceed to question 7

3. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know
3. The workshop(s) explained the mandate of councils	○	○	○	○	○
4. The workshop(s) were informative about my role on council	○	○	○	○	○
5. The workshop(s) were informative about school council involvement in school improvement planning through the school's Three-Year Education Plan	○	○	○	○	○
6. The workshop(s) were informative about the differences between a school council and a fundraising society	○	○	○	○	○

7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable
7. I have a clear understanding of what our council is expected to accomplish.	○	○	○	○	○
8. I have a clear understanding of the legislation governing school councils	○	○	○	○	○
9. I have a working knowledge of our council by-laws/operating procedures	○	○	○	○	○
10. I feel confident in my ability to run an effective meeting	○	○	○	○	○
11. I feel confident in my ability to work in a collaborative group	○	○	○	○	○
12. I feel satisfied with how student achievement data is explained to council	○	○	○	○	○

PART IV   OPERATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

13. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know
13. Our council follows consistent operating procedures/by-laws and decision-making processes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. Our council has an effective process for resolving conflicts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. Our council uses formal communication tools to keep all members informed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. Please answer each of the following questions:

	Yes	No	Don't know
16. Does your council seek advice from the school community?	☐	☐	☐
17. Does your council refer to the provincial legislation for guidance?	☐	☐	☐
18. Does your council refer to school and division policy for guidance?	☐	☐	☐
19. Does your council provide advice on the school's three-year Education Plan and Annual Results report?	☐	☐	☐

20. Has your council established a three-year plan?

    ○   Yes
    ○   No
    ○   Don't know

If "No" or "Don't know", please proceed to question 22

21. Does your council evaluate its three-year plan on an annual basis?

    ○   Yes
    ○   No
    ○   Don't know

22. Please identify the three most important goals/priorities established by the school council this year.

Priority # 1 _____

_____

Priority # 2 _____

_____

Priority # 3 _____

_____

23. What tools has the council used this year for communicating with the school community?

(Select all that apply)

☐   Meetings
☐   Newsletters
☐   Formal reports
☐   Surveys
☐   Website
☐   Sitting on Committees and Task Forces
☐   Other (please specify: _____)
☐   Don't know

24. What kinds of consultations was your school council involved in during the past year?

(Select all that apply)

☐   School calendar
☐   School policy development or review
☐   Code of conduct
☐   Division policy development or review
☐   School Budget
☐   Preparation of the school's three-year plan
☐   School programs
☐   Preparation of the Division's three-year plan
☐   School goals and priorities
☐   Community Issues
☐   Student Achievement
☐   Other (please specify: _____)
☐   Don't know

25. What percentage of council time was spent on each of the following activities during the past year?

If you are unsure of the exact breakdown, please provide your best approximations. Your responses must add up to 100%. If you are truly unable to estimate, you may check "don't know".

Providing advice to the school principal		%
Providing advice to the division		%
Consulting/reporting to parents & community		%
Workshops and training		%
Networking with other school councils		%
Fundraising		%
Other: _____		%
Total:	**100**	*%*

☐ Don't know

26. In what ways was your school council involved in developing or revising the School's Three-Year Education Plan during the past year?

(Select all that apply)

☐ Explanation and discussion of the completed Plan
☐ Providing feedback and recommendations on the Draft Plan
☐ Consultations during the development of the Plan
☐ Advising on school initiatives in the Plan
☐ Reviewing student achievement data with respect to school improvement planning
☐ Participating on related school committees
☐ Other (please specify: _____)
☐ Don't know

27. In what ways has your school council supported the implementation of priorities and goals set out in the School's Three-Year Education Plan?

(Select all that apply)

☐ Suggesting council activities to support the goals in the Plan
☐ Membership on committees on specific school initiatives
☐ Providing information to parents
☐ Gathering information or conducting surveys
☐ Funding of specific initiatives
☐ Developing a formal Council Plan to support the School Plan
☐ Other (please specify):_____
☐ Don't know

28. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
28. Our council has access to adequate funds to achieve its goals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29. Our council has sufficient members to fulfill its duties	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
30. Our council has access to sufficient training to develop the skills necessary to meet its mandate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
31. Our council has adequate opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
32. Our council has timely access to the information and documents required to do its work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
33. Our council has adequate resources (handbooks, templates, etc) to facilitate its work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
34. Our council has adequate tools and support for communication and data-gathering	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

35. Identify your top three priorities for council member training and in-service.

Priority # 1 _____

_____

Priority # 2 _____

_____

Priority # 3 _____

_____

36. Identify your most useful council resource.

_____

_____

37. Identify your top <u>three</u> priorities for additional resources or support.

Priority # 1 _____

_____

Priority # 2 _____

_____

Priority # 3 _____

_____

If you are <u>NOT</u> a Principal, please proceed to question 43

Principal Only
38. How useful is the Alberta School Council Resource Manual to you in working with your school council?

- ○ Very useful
- ○ Somewhat useful
- ○ Not very useful
- ○ Not at all useful
- ○ Don't know

Principal Only
39. Are opportunities provided for principals in your jurisdiction to acquire effective strategies for working with school councils?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Don't know

If "No" or "Don't know", please proceed to question 41

Principal Only
40. Which types of opportunities are available to you to acquire effective strategies for working with your school council:

(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Workshops
- ☐ District Developed Materials (Guides, Policy manuals, etc)
- ☐ Formal courses
- ☐ Networking with other principals
- ☐ Other (please specify)_____
- ☐ Don't know

Principal Only

41. Approximately what percentage of your time as principal is devoted to working with the school council?

(Please provide your best estimate)

_____%

Principal Only

42. Please rate your school council's effectiveness in supporting student achievement at your school.

- ○   Very effective
- ○   Somewhat effective
- ○   Not very effective
- ○   Not at all effective
- ○   Don't know

PART VI   SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

43. Identify the three most important accomplishments of the school council this year.

Accomplishment #1   _____

_____

Accomplishment #2   _____

_____

Accomplishment #3   _____

_____

44. Identify three challenges the council has overcome this year.

Challenge #1   _____

_____

Challenge #2   _____

_____

Challenge #3   _____

_____

45. Identify three challenges the council continues to face.

Challenge #1 _____

_____

Challenge #2 _____

_____

Challenge #3 _____

_____

46. How would you rate your council's effectiveness this past year in…

	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not very effective	Not at all effective	Don't know
46. Influencing school priorities for improving student achievement?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
47. Building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
48. Playing a meaningful role in district improvement processes?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Thank you for your responses.

Please use the space below to provide us with any further comments on your school council or on the survey in general.

_____

_____

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Alberta School Councils Survey
Superintendent and Chairman
Spring 2008

We are interested in your views on the collective work of school councils in your Division. Your participation in this survey commissioned by the Alberta School Councils' Association will provide useful information for the ongoing development and support of school councils. A separate, longer survey is being conducted for school council members. The data is being collected by an independent survey firm, and all responses are strictly confidential. A provincial report on the findings will be available to individual school councils, School Divisions, education partner organizations, and Alberta Education in September 2008.

To complete the survey:

We greatly appreciate your time in completing this study and we have provided a number of ways that you can complete the study and you may choose the method most convenient for you:

- **You may complete the survey by typing in the link that you were provided in the cover letter into your internet address bar to complete the survey online.**

- **You may complete this form and fax the survey directly to Insightrix Research, an independent survey firm at 306-384-5655.**

- **You may phone Insightrix to speak to a telephone agent to complete the questionnaire over the phone at a time that is convenient for you. You may call Insightrix toll free at 1-866-872-1500.**

For more information:

If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact Kirsten Bennett, Research Manager, SAEE at 250-717-1163 or kbennett@saee.ca.

If you have any questions while completing the questionnaire, please contact Insightrix at surveyor1@insightrix.com or call toll free 866-888-5640.

PART I   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A1. What is your position in the Division?

○   Superintendent   (or Designate)
○   Chairman of the Board of Trustees (or Alternate Board Member)

PART II   SURVEY

1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding school councils (collectively) in your Division:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know
1. Our school councils have access to sufficient training to develop the skills necessary to meet their mandate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Our school councils have adequate opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Our school councils have timely access to the information and documents required to do their work	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Our school councils have access to adequate resources to meet their responsibilities as set out in the school council regulation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. How would you rate the effectiveness of your school councils this past year in:

	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not very effective	Not at all effective	Don't know
5. Influencing school priorities for improving student achievement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Building positive relationships with the principal and other school and community stakeholders	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Playing a meaningful role in district improvement processes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. How useful is the *Alberta School Council Resource Manual* in supporting jurisdiction staff in their work with school councils?

- ○ Very useful
- ○ Somewhat useful
- ○ Not very useful
- ○ Not at all useful
- ○ Don't know

9. Has your jurisdiction sought support from the Alberta School Councils' Association in the past three years?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

If "Yes", please proceed to question 10

If "No", please proceed to question 11

10. What type of support has your Division received from the Alberta School Councils' Association in the past three years?

(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Training Workshops
- ☐ Resource Materials
- ☐ Other - Please specify: _____

11. How does your jurisdiction ensure all school councils are provided with their school's results on the provincial achievement testing program, an interpretation of these results, and the school's annual education plan and annual results report?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

(Attach a separate sheet of paper if there is not enough space provided above. Please include the question number.)

12. What jurisdiction-wide opportunities for school councils to collaborate with one another were provided in the most recent three years?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

13. What opportunities are provided for principals to acquire effective strategies for working with school councils?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

(Attach a separate sheet of paper if there is not enough space provided above. Please include the question number.)

14. Are school councils provided an opportunity for involvement in your Division's Three-Year Education Plans?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

If "No", please proceed to final comments

15. How are school councils involved in your Division's Three-Year Education Plans?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for your responses.

Please use the space below to provide us with any further comments on school councils in your Division or on the survey in general.

_____

_____

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_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

(Attach a separate sheet of paper if there is not enough space provided above. Please include the question number.)

Once you have completed this form, please fax your responses to Insightrix Research, Inc. at <u>306-384-5655</u>.

Thank you for your cooperation.

A Survey of Alberta School Councils 2008:
Realities, Perspectives and Challenges

This baseline survey of school councils in Alberta conducted in April-May 2008 provides insight into the operations of councils at both the school and jurisdictional level. It presents a snapshot of the current state of perspectives of five different stakeholder groups: Principals, School Council Chairs, School Council Members, Superintendents and School Board Chairs.

School councils in Alberta are demonstrating a growing role in the education system but continue to face challenges with membership and adapting to their mandated involvement as advisors in educational planning. There is much to celebrate and much to strive for in the journey of school councils toward their role as advisors to principals and boards. This baseline survey provides a useful benchmark against which to measure the continued progress of councils.

This research was commissioned by the Alberta School Councils' Association.

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF Excellence in Education