

Not Many Parents, Not Much Involvement: A Study of Parent-Centred School
Partnership Councils in Three Rural Manitoba School

by

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ABSTRACT

Manitoba, like all provinces since the 1990s, has put forth efforts to increase parental input into local school decision making. Despite efforts, parents struggle to gain the recognition and support required to be true stakeholders in school governance. Six members of parent-centred school partnership councils (PSPCs) were interviewed in this qualitative study to determine the role and potential of such councils in three rural Manitoba public schools. This study suggests that the strong efforts since the 1990s for Manitoba schools to have parents as true partners in shared governance has not fully been realized.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

In recent decades, across Canada and in many other countries, considerable attention has been given to increasing the role of parents in their children's schooling. Efforts to increase parental involvement have taken many different forms (Epstein, 1996) in different jurisdictions and have generally been justified on one of two grounds: that parental involvement has been consistently shown to have positive effects on student learning (Waters, 2002) or that parental involvement enhances accountability and strengthens public involvement in the governance of public education (Kelley-Laine, 1998; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood & Earl, 2000). Associated with this movement for parental involvement has been increased attention to the establishment or strengthening of a variety of different formal, parent-centred, school partnership councils¹ (Chan, Fisher & Rubenson, 2007; Young, Levin & Wallin, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine, from the perspective of parents, the role and potential of such councils at three public schools in rural Manitoba.

The Case for Parental Involvement

Substantial amounts of research evidence regarding the importance of parental involvement in their children's education has been collecting over the past 35 years in Canada and internationally (Driessen, Smit, & Slegers, 2005; Epstein, Jansorn, Sheldon, Saunders, Salinas, & Simon, 2008; Epstein, 1996; Leithwood, 2005; McKenna

¹ "Parent-centred School Partnership Councils" (PSPCs) is the umbrella term used in this thesis to subsume the variety of different names given to formal or semi-formal, school-based organizations designed provide parents (and often other participants) with some input into school decision making and school life.

& Wilms, 1998). Much of this research suggests that, across all grade levels, the amount of parental involvement in education is directly linked to their children's academic success in schools. That is, the greater the involvement, the greater the achievement affects, which include higher grades and test scores (Ballantine, 1999; Cotton, 1989; Waters, 2002). Parents who work with their children so that they become successful in their early school years tend to set them up for a greater likelihood of success in later years at higher grade levels. Success perpetuates success; as the child's level of accomplishment rises, so does his/her self-esteem. Positive self-esteem increases motivation towards school and hence, a more positive attitude towards learning (Waters, 2002), which in turn translates into increased success in schooling. The Harvard Family Research Project (2007) concluded that high parental involvement along with high expectations for achievement is the most significant influence on high school students' achievement growth, high school credits completed, and enrollment in extracurricular academic high school programs. This improved student performance leads towards a greater likelihood of success in higher education and career preparation (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2007).

Just as there is a body of research that highlights the benefits for children's learning when their parents are involved in their schooling, likewise, other authors point to the benefits for parents, teachers, principals, school boards and schools in general (Brown, 2007; Epstein, 2009; Hornby, 2000). According to Brown (2007), parents support teachers in two ways. First, parents can help at home by getting their children prepared to learn. Second, they can contribute by helping in ways that focus on educational practices (Brown, 2007). When parents take an active role in their children's

education, not only do they witness and feel a part of the successes their children are having, they strengthen their own learning, skills and leadership (Epstein, 2009; School Partnerships, 2005). Also, the sense of accomplishment they obtain from helping their children succeed can lead to an increase in their own sense of self-esteem (Ballantine, 1999).

Other studies (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007) focus on how teachers and administrators also benefit from parental involvement. When parents are involved in their child's education, there is likely to be better overall communication and relations among parents, teachers and administrators. This tends to help teachers become more aware of cultural and community matters; and in doing so they become more skilled in approaching parents in a much more meaningful and effective manner (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). In turn, parents are more understanding of school issues, and teachers and administrators feel they have much more family support (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, 1994). Moreover, better communication leads to improved rapport (Cotton, 1989) and better reputations in the community. When educators feel they have parental support, they report higher job satisfaction than those who feel they don't have parental support (Lumsden, 1998).

In addition to working directly with their children and schools, parental engagement across Canadian provincial school systems has, over the last three decades, become formalized in legislation designed to strengthen a variety of different parent-centred school partnership councils, variously named "School Councils" (i.e. Ontario, Newfoundland), "Parent Advisory Committees" (i.e. British Columbia, Northwest Territories), or, in Manitoba, "Advisory Councils for School Leadership"

(Chan, Fisher & Rubenson, 2007). These structures vary from province to province in terms of their names, their membership, and their jurisdiction in school matters, but they all tend to share a primarily advisory and communicative role, and a common purpose in promoting increased parental input/voice in school decision making (The Canadian Home and School Federation, 2002).

Each of the provincial governments in Canada have been working on strategies to strengthen parental councils through legislation, because they see parent councils as one of the most vital means for improving schools' performances (Kelley-Laine, 1998; McKenna, 1998). Some advocates promote PCSCs as an important mechanism for ensuring school accountability to parents and the community (Leithwood, 2000). Others suggest that PCSCs are important because they provide a means by which parents and/or community members can help make site-based or local decisions which impact upon the local school community. In this way, PCSCs become a means of supporting the public purposes of education through local school governance; and in addition, these councils may serve as the vehicle through which a variety of other forms of parental involvement and support may occur.

Controversies Related to Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils

Joyce Epstein, a Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University, Director of the Centre on Schools, Families and Community Partnerships and of the National Network of Partnership Schools, and for the last three decades a leading North American scholar parental involvement argues that, "there is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for parental involvement" (Epstein, 2009, p. 1). Yet the ideal of school-family-community partnerships proposed by

advocates such as Epstein often show little resemblance to current practices. In some contexts authors suggest that parental involvement in schools is on the decline (Keane, 2007), while others insist that parental involvement is not necessary and, indeed, can have negative results (de Carvelho, 2001; Kohn, 1998; Lambert, 2003).

Alfie Kohn (1998), for example, advises that it is naive to assume that simply giving parents a substantial voice in the core areas of shared decision making is inevitably going to be beneficial, and discusses three controversies that may be perpetuated within PCSCs related to instruction, placement and sorting students. The first example considers decisions about the nature of instruction. Parents, particularly those who did well in school or have children doing well in school, may find it hard to accept innovative school changes with regards to instruction and grading. These parents, he suggests, may believe in traditional classroom practices that emphasize grades and knowledge based learning; after all these practices led them to the successes and lifestyles they enjoy; and *their* kids are doing fine the way things are. Conversely, parents whose children are struggling look for change that may benefit their children. They often welcome the shift to new evaluation systems that embrace assessment practices such as rubrics and narrative evaluations (Kohn, 1998). Such differences in belief around the nature of instruction can greatly affect how the educational environment for students is structured, and therefore, contentions amongst PCSCs in this regard could be quite heated and not necessarily positive.

A second contention relates to the nature of placement, or the distribution of resources, particularly with a focus on “who gets what” opportunities. The literature suggests that parents may debate over, and fight for initiatives that call for class

groupings based on ability, such as tiered classes; gifted programs, and honors courses (Kohn, 1998). Parent advisory councils may call for actions that label and separate students into (seemingly) like groups so that their children will benefit from working with and around other 'strong' students. Many times these views contradict those of educators who believe in an inclusive education system.

Finally, addressing Kohn's concerns about the sorting of students, Lambert (2003) stated that parents may advocate for programs that call for the development of competitive structures that imply "some (their) students win and many others lose" (p. 68). Selecting and sorting practices emphasize that only a few students are recognized through such practices as awards, letter grades, weighted grades, honor rolls, and class ranks. These initiatives for which parents of high achieving students commonly fight, usually allow for only a subtle number of students to feel as though they did really well. Again, this contradicts the educational belief that classrooms are learning environments that should allow for all students to be successful (Kohn, 1998; Lambert, 2003).

Getting parents involved in school governance can be a very complex and frustrating affair (Kohn, 1998; Lambert, 2003) and as a consequence schools often maintain superficial partnerships, or even discourage affiliation all together (Renewing Education, 2000). Educators can be extremely hesitant and even fearful with the notion of bringing parents and community members into educational decision making processes (Granowsky, 1979). For some, educators can be deemed extremely territorial and protective. They don't want parents getting involved for a number of reasons. For instance, they may feel that parents don't understand educational issues the way they do based on their own education (university, workshops, etc.) and work

experience. Or, they may assume this will get in the way of moving forward with new initiatives and may stifle teacher autonomy; resulting in a loss of control or power (Granowsky, 1979; Indiana, 2001). Violand-Sanchez (1991) summarizes this sentiment from educators by stating, some believe “decisions about education practices and curriculum should be left to professional educators who know what’s best for students” (p.4).

It is against this background of currency and controversy that this study examines the perceptions of six current members of parent-centred school partnership councils from three rural Manitoba schools regarding the value of such councils.

Types of Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils in Manitoba

Manitoba Education (Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth, 2005)² identifies four distinct types of school partnership councils that exist in Manitoba schools: *Advisory Councils for School Leadership (ACSLs)*, *Parent Advisory Councils*, *Home and School Associations*, and *School Committees* (Table 1).

² The Department of Education in Manitoba has gone through a number of name changes in recent years. During the 1990s it was called Manitoba Education and Training. In 2001 it was renamed Manitoba, Education, Training and Youth. In 2004 it became Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, and in 2009 it became simply Manitoba Education. In this thesis the title Manitoba Education will be used unless reference is being made to the department at a specific moment in time or to a document published in a specific year - in those cases the name in operation at the time will be use

Table 1

Parental School Partnerships in Manitoba

Group	Advisory Council for School Leadership (ACSL)	Parent Advisory Council (PAC)	Home and School Association (HAS)	School Committees (SC)
Governed By:	-Guided by Legislation	-Guided by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School policies • Local school board/local education authority policies 		
Description	-Elected at annual meeting according to constitution and by-laws -Hold regular open, public meetings			-Volunteer nomination, or election based on local decision
	-Provide a forum and voice for parents and communities to discuss and present views -Encourage parent participation -Liaise with school administrators			
Membership	Parents, community members (other than parents), students, teacher representatives, and school administrators.			
Sample Activities	- Participate in school improvement activities - Discuss school plans with administrators - Inform parents and community members of school activities - Promote community interest, understanding, and involvement - Advocate for quality education and well-being of children and youth - Inform parents and community members of school activities and volunteer opportunities - Coordinate specific events such as Safe Grad, fundraising, fairs, and lunch programs			

(PACs), Home and School Associations (HSAs), and School Committees. Table 1, reproduced from the Manitoba Education (2005, p. 7) document, *School partnerships: A guide for parents, schools and communities*, summarizes key aspects of each of these models.

Advisory Councils for School Leadership (ACSLs)

Although not mandated for all schools, *Advisory Councils for School Leadership* are the only one of these four types of councils that are guided by specific provincial legislation and regulation. Incorporated into the government of the time's larger education reform agenda (Manitoba Education, 1994), the legislation to allow for the establishment of ACSLs was written into the *Education Administration Act*, passed on March 20, 1996 (The Education Administration Act, C.C.S.M. c. E10) and is elaborated upon in *Regulation 54/96 Advisory Councils for School Leadership*. According to *regulation 54/96*, ACSLs may advise on the following topics: school policies, activities, and organization; fundraising; hiring and assigning principals; school budgeting; school planning; and reviewing schools as directed by the Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth, or the school board, and shall communicate with parents and community members so that it can properly represent their interests and concerns, and establish a means to be accountable to the school and community for its activities and expenditures.

Regulation 54/96 does not require all schools to establish ACSLs, but it does require a principal to convene a public meeting to discuss the formation of such a Committee when requested to do so by at least 10 parents with children attending the school. At such meetings the parents may choose to establish an ASCL in line with the provisions of the Regulation, or may choose to continue with any existing parent-centred school partnership council – which would not be subject to the provisions of Regulation 54/96 but would have to comply with school board and school policies. Schools are not permitted to have both an ACSL and another form of Council. As stated

above, four different PSPCs are operating in Manitoba: Advisory Council for School Leadership (ACSL), Parent advisory Councils (PAC), Home and School Association (HAS) and School Committees (SC). All three of the PSPCs that were studied for this thesis are designated Parent Advisory Councils.

Statement of the Problem

In many provinces, where schools claim to be partners with parents, parents struggle to gain the recognition and support required to be influential stakeholders in school governance. That is, often parents are not included as influential partners in financial, consultative or educational aspects of decision making in schools (Waters, 2002). Epstein (2004) concluded that while most schools do initiate a few initiatives to promote parental involvement in school activities, most lack the well-organized, goal-linked, and sustainable partnership programs that are required to maintain a true partnership. In Canada, Young, Levin and Wallin (2008) suggest that, “schools have generally made only limited attempts to develop structured links with parents, and home-school relations are often still characterized by a considerable degree of unease” (p. 253).

This research study examined, from the perspective of six parents involved in parent-centred school partnership councils, the role of these councils at three rural schools in Manitoba. In doing this I had two primary purposes. First, I wanted to document the ways in which parent-centred school partnership councils had been organized within the schools selected for study. Second, I focused on the degree to which schools and parent-centred school partnership councils were seen to be working together on issues of school governance at their local schools and/or helped to foster

parental engagement. In order to achieve these purposes, the following research questions are addressed:

1. How is formal parental involvement in school governance organized within the parent-centred school partnership councils of an early years school, a K-12 school, and a high school (7-12) in one rural school division in Manitoba?
2. In what ways do select members of these councils perceive that their councils are contributing to their local schools and/or fostering parental engagement?
3. What, if any, changes to their roles and responsibilities would members recommend to strengthen the ability of Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils to contribute to their local schools and/or foster parental engagement in schooling?

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study, some of which naturally occur as features of qualitative research and focus groups.

Because the nature of qualitative research is time consuming, small sample sizes are necessary. For this reason, as well as the fact that subjects were not randomly chosen, qualitative studies cannot be generalized to describe larger populations (Hancock, 1998). Although conclusions are drawn, it remains up to the reader to find issues that resonate within the thick description and findings of the research within his/her own context.

All researchers should acknowledge that they cannot eliminate personal biases when they are partaking in qualitative research methods (Bogdan, 2007). I am a parent of a child not yet in school, and I am a principal, which means that I have an interest in

understanding the role of Parent Centred School Partnerships from both a parental and school governance perspective. Although this dual location may in fact help me understand the phenomena from both perspectives, it may be that my role as an educational professional within the school system biased my understandings of the school governance aspect of this study. In addition, some participants may have felt that my administrative role put me in a position of power; they may have been intimidated, or believed I was looking for particular answers that could skew the nature of their responses. Therefore it was important for me to be clear about my purpose, encourage critical and honest reflection, and triangulate my data using multiple sources to ensure that I had support for the contentions that I made.

My focus was on getting schools that were part of the same school division and I tried to include a broad range of grade levels in my study. The schools I researched are dissimilar in grade composition, and there is some overlap between early years, middle years and senior year's grade levels at two of the schools. This is typical in rural Manitoba school divisions, where many schools have unique grade compositions and student populations. The focus on researching a cross-section of grades, and picking them randomly, means that there was no attempt to select specific types of PCSCs or any attempt to identify exemplars of strong PCSCs that may have ASCL designation.

Definition of Terms

Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils (PCSCs). For the intents and purposes of this study, the generic terms *Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils* will include all parent groups, including Parent Advisory Councils (PAC), Advisory Councils for School Leadership (ACSL), Home and School Associations (HSA), and

School Committees (SC). These groups in Manitoba have a number of similarities in how they are governed, what they do, and how their membership works (Table 1). Specific PCSCs types were named throughout the paper if distinction was deemed beneficial; particularly ACSLs were denoted as such when distinction was necessary, because of their legislated responsibilities. However, none of the PCSCs researched in this study was an ACSL which has important ramifications for the extent of parental engagement in governance as is demonstrated later in the study.

Parents: Throughout this study, the term parent(s) refers to those who have children attending schools. The term was used to include guardians and foster parents. It is important to note that the term did not include parents of children who were no longer attending schools. In this study, all those who were interviewed with the exception of one parent council member were parents of children currently attending school.

Grade Groupings in Manitoba: Manitoba schools offer 13 grades, which range from Kindergarten to Grade 12. They are grouped into Early Years, Middle Years, and Senior Years:

Early Years: Include grades Kindergarten to Grade 4, with an approximate age of students being 5 to 10 years old.

Middle Years: Includes Grades 5 to 8, with an approximate age of students being 11 to 14 years old.

Senior Years: Includes Grades 9-12, with an approximate age of students being 15 to 18 years old.

Manitoba Education curriculum documents recognize these groupings, but many schools, particularly in rural schools have grade levels that cross these three levels for pragmatic reasons. The school that houses Kindergarten to Grade 5 students is named an *Early Years school*, and the *Grade 7-12* school is considered a Senior Years school. However, to make it easier on the reader the schools will be identified by grade level. That is the Kindergarten to Grade 5 school will be identified as *K-5*; the *Grade 7 to Grade 12* school will be identified as *7-12*; and the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school will be identified as *K-12*.

The Significance of the Study

There is a significant research literature that suggests that children are more successful in school when their parents are directly involved in their education. Not only can children benefit from parental involvement, but so too can teachers, principals, school boards, communities, schools, and parents themselves. Provincial governments in Canada have been working on strategies to strengthen school partnerships between parents and schools, because they see it as one of the most vital means for improving school's performances. PCSCs are a formalized mechanism enacted both to provide public accountability of the school to the local community as well as to allow for input into local decision-making about important school issues. However, a substantial amount of research also concludes that PCSCs are not being utilized as intended, and are often not 'true partners' in education. In discussing and implementing changes in educational policies and practices rural schools have a unique set of circumstances when compared to those in urban centres that may require different approaches (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). A study of current practices in three rural Manitoba schools can

provide an important basis for thinking about how best families and school can work together in the best interests of education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Parental involvement in their children's schools may take many forms and have different justifications. Parent-centred school partnership councils represent one form of parental involvement that has been promoted recently in many different jurisdictions, including Manitoba (Manitoba Education, 1996, 2005). While these councils are generally justified in terms of increased accountability and public participation in public education (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2008), they may also serve as a vehicle for organizing other forms of parental engagement with their children's education. This literature review begins by examining Joyce Epstein's seminal work in the USA that looks broadly at the potential benefits across a broad range of different forms of partnerships between parents and schools (Epstein, 1995; 2004, 2009). The review then focuses on some of the barriers to parental engagement in education identified in the literature. After this, the focus of the chapter is narrowed to parent-centred school partnership councils, and the chapter concludes with a description of the legislated roles and responsibilities of such councils in Manitoba.

Joyce Epstein's Work on Parental Involvement

Joyce Epstein is a Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University; Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships; and, Principal Research Scientist and Co-director of the School, Family, and Community Partnership Program. She has authored over one hundred books, articles, essays and studies on the topic of parental engagement/families and schools, and is the author of the book, *School,*

Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action (Epstein, 2009; <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/w9-bios.html>).

Epstein offers a typology of six different types of parental engagement in schools that consist of: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2009; Epstein, 1995). This framework for constructing a comprehensive approach to parental involvement has been widely accepted as standards for parental involvement by organizations such as (American) State Departments of Education and the National Parent Teacher Association (Indiana, 2001; Henderson, 2002). The first version of this framework appeared in the journal *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1995 (Epstein, 1995) and has been updated over the years by organizations in the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, based on their research findings and continued work with more than 150 districts (divisions) and over a thousand schools in the United States (Epstein, 2009).

Though Epstein's model is generally used to describe the roles of individual parents rather than formal PCSCs, I believed it would be an interesting framework to inform my thinking about how it is that PCSCs might affect their local schools in ways that benefit children directly (in addition to asking them about their role in local governance and decision-making more generally). Each of Epstein's six types of engagement is discussed briefly below.

Parenting

Epstein's research suggests that one way that schools can assist parents is by helping them develop the skills that will help them in raising their children, particularly

with regards to their education. Schools, she suggests, can help in a variety of ways. They can offer training and workshops and/or they can distribute learning materials and dispense useful information (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, 2002; Toppings, 1987). Moreover, educators can visit homes, particularly at educational transition points, to help families better understand schools, and to help schools better understand families (Epstein, 2009).

Communicating

Two-way communication channels are, Epstein argues, extremely important aspects of school and family collaboration and should be developed to share information about school programs and student progress (Epstein, 2009). Daniel Goleman (1998) wrote, “being an adept communicator is the keystone of all social skills” (p. 176). He added that clear and meaningful statements are not enough to constitute strong communication skills. Strong listening skills by all communicators are also crucial for strong communication (Goleman, 1998). In line with this, Epstein suggests, schools and parents benefit when there is a focus on establishing effective two-way, school-to-home and home-to-school, means of communication.

Volunteering

Volunteering, to Epstein, does not simply refer to putting in time behind the scenes for such initiatives as fundraising; nor does it focus on the call for parents to act as chaperones on field trips. Volunteering can be much more in-depth than that. Schools, she suggests, must work to apply effective ways to recruit, train and schedule volunteers to help within the school and classroom (Epstein, 2009). Parents can take an active role in assisting teachers with preparing and presenting lessons, working with

librarians to improve the library, and organizing intramurals and other fitness events (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999).

Learning at Home

Children's academic achievement improves when schools and families share ideas and strategies that help children learn at home. Learning at home can be developed with regards to homework, goal setting, and curriculum-related activities that are based on the skills students require (Epstein, 2009; Toppings, 1987). Henderson (2002) concluded, "workshops for parents on helping their children at home were linked to higher reading and math scores" (p. 13). Moreover, students benefit when teachers give meaningful and interesting homework that they can discuss with their parents (Epstein, 2009).

Collaborating with the Community

Collaboration between families and schools can be enhanced when schools identify and integrate community resources and services that strengthen their programs, family practices and student learning and development (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, 2002). Community resources that can be helpful include businesses, government agencies and postsecondary institutions (Epstein, 2009).

Decision-making

The final form of parental engagement in Epstein's typology is related to school governance – the primary focus of this study. Parental involvement in school governance, at the individual school level, can involve recruiting members for school organizations, advisory groups and committees, school councils, improvement teams, and parent organizations (Epstein, 2009). It is also important to develop leaders who

can help create networks through these organizations in order to involve all parents, not just those directly linked to formal school groups (Epstein, 2009).

Given the fact that parent-centred school partnership councils are one formal and structured means of fostering parental engagement in many school, it follows that the relationship between schools and their councils, and the activities in which they engage together to benefit the educative purposes of the school have the potential to pave the way for broad-based parental support. It is therefore one of the purposes of this study to determine the extent to which the three Manitoba parent-centred school partnerships selected in this study serve as a viable vehicle to promote broadly based parental engagement across the range of activities suggested in Epstein's work.

Barriers to Parental Engagement

Parents and teachers have been communicating since the establishment of schooling. However, whether self-inflicted or imposed, many parents presently have an ambivalent, if not adversarial, relationship with their children's schools. As a number of authors have documented; this is often most evident at the secondary level (Cutler, 2000; LaBahn, 1995) even though parents care about their children and want them to succeed. Many well-meaning parents may even feel guilt from their lack of participation because educators, reformers, and politicians have recently made such an issue of parental involvement (Cutler III, 2000). There are many reasons why there is a lack of parental involvement. Schaeffer (1992) suggests that many of these reasons are based on misconceptions, stereotypes and misunderstandings.

Likewise, while many teachers and administrators would like to improve family involvement, they often do not know how to go about building positive and productive

programs, and are consequently fearful about trying (Van Vorhis, 2002). As Epstein (2005) suggests, “most educators encounter schools without an understanding of family backgrounds, concepts of caring, the framework of partnerships, or the ‘basics’ for creating and maintaining strong partnerships”(p. 93). This is problematic because it is crucial that teachers and administrators initiate plans to improve relationships between them and the home (Cutler III, 2000; LaBahn, 1995).

Even when parents wish to get involved there are several reasons they hesitate or find it difficult to get involved in their children’s education. Family and demographical changes play a large role in the lack of parent involvement. Often it is much less practically possible for parental involvement than it was in the past because more families consist of either two working parents, or single-parents. Thus, many parents may not have the support or the time necessary to attend important school events (Hornby, 2000). Also, particularly in rural areas, some parents may not be able to find the time because they live too far away from the school to be able to move between home and work responsibilities, and travel for school events (LaBahn, 1995; Van Vorhis, 2002).

Lack of involvement can also be attributed to parents’ own parents’ behaviour. That is, many parents of those who are currently parents may not have been involved in their education, so they lack models of parental involvement from which to base their own actions (Ballantine, 1999). This means that lack of parental involvement can be cyclical, and be passed from generation to generation through a lack of positive modeling.

Parents are considered a critical influence in the learning of all school-aged children, even as they get older (Bouffard, 2007). However, research has found that parent involvement is affected by the age of the children in a family as well as the number of children in a family. There is much greater communication between parents and teachers when children are young than when children are older. That is, as children graduate from grade to grade there is progressively less parental involvement in their education (Seifert, 1992).

Parental involvement generally decreases as children move from grade to grade for several reasons (Cotton, 1989; LaBahn, 1995). Schools get larger and farther from home, making it less convenient for parents to visit. Classes get more complex and specialized, which can intimidate and embarrass parents. Students have more teachers, making it less viable to form strong relationships. And, students are becoming more mature and independent, which separates them from their parents and minimizes communication, making it more difficult for parents to stay attuned to school life (Cotton, 1989).

Gestwicki, (1987) classified barriers of parental involvement into three categories: human nature, communication, and external factors, each of which are elaborated on below.

Human Nature Factors

Human nature factors, for Gestwicki, refer to barriers that threaten one's self esteem. Human nature factors include fear of failure, insecurity, intimidation, distrust through power struggles between school and home, fear of criticism, or protection of professional territory (Schaeffer, 1992; SSTA, 1999). Parents may feel powerless and

disrespected when they communicate with educators. Many feel as though teachers are insensitive to the needs of individual children, and that teachers show very little value in the knowledge parents hold with regards to their own children (Seifert, 1992).

From the teachers' perspective, although most agree that parents should be involved in their children's education, some educators have concerns with too much parental influence. Principals and teachers alike may consider it inappropriate to share their authority in decision making areas such as hiring, evaluating, and prioritizing for the school budget because they view these areas as their professional domain, and most parents do not have the educational background, or the classroom experience, to make informed decisions (Cotton, 1989; Violand-Sanchez, 1991; Young, Levin & Wallin 2008).

Some educators go so far as insisting the role of parents is to simply receive information once important decisions are made (Anderson, 1994). Principals and teachers are concerned with issues of self-interest and matters of confidentiality and privacy; or they are concerned that parents focus on the special needs of a few students instead of taking into accounts the needs of the majority of students when making important decisions (Kohn, 1998; McKenna, 1998; SSTA, 1999). The majority of parents, on the other hand, feel they are capable of aiding in sound decisions. (Anderson: *Involving Parents and Families in Schools*, 1994).

Parent involvement is important for all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or income level (Bouffard, 2007). Unfortunately, according to Brown (2007), "the relationship between parent involvement and socioeconomic status is an international phenomenon" (p. 502). Over the past 35 years, studies have consistently

shown that middle-class parents are much more supportive of teachers than disadvantaged and rich parents (Brown, 2007). Such research states that poor parents may feel they lack the expertise, or they have been demoralized and disenfranchised by the school system; whereas the rich can simply register their children in private schools if they are not satisfied with the public system (SSTA, 1999).

Charges of inequitable policies and programming, racism and lower expectations abound in the literature. As Young, Levin and Wallin (2008) state, “Generally, the practices of middle class parents tend to complement the work expectations of teachers, while the demands of child care, employment, and meeting basic needs with which poorer families must struggle often conflict with the demands of teachers” (p. 252). In addition, the lack of communication between teachers and disadvantaged minority parents perpetuates a mistaken assumption that these parents are disinterested in their child’s education (Brown, 2007).

Communication

For Gestwicki (1987), communication barriers occur when there is a lack of understanding between parents and educators. This happens when communication as intended is not understood properly, when there is skepticism with regards to the integrity of the message, or when there is a language or cultural gap. These types of barriers often occur, Gestwicki suggests, because there is a large discrepancy in social class or cultural backgrounds, or a difference in values that cause misunderstanding and discomfort between educators and parents. Also, teachers and parents are less available to communicate, because (as further discussed below) time becomes a crucial issue and protected commodity for educators and parents (Seifert, 2002).

External Factors

External factors refer to those that are not personal characteristics of the parents and educators involved, but play a key role over what happens (Schaeffer, 1992). Examples of external factors include lack of time, busy lifestyles, personal problems, administrative policies, unclear roles, and inadequate training or support (Schaeffer, 1992; SSTA, 1999). Lack of time and energy due to tough economic times is also an issue for some parents (Comer, 2005; Labahn, 1995).

Unfortunately, many men are not directly involved in their children's education. That is, traditionally in many situations the majority of parents involved in their child's education tend to be women. Because so many educators are mothers themselves, they tend to be very busy with families of their own, and do not always have the flexibility to meet with other parents at their convenience (SSTA, 1999).

Training and experience for teachers and parents alike serves as a barrier to parent involvement in education. Teachers, for the most part, are not trained to work with parents, and feel uncomfortable dealing with other adults particularly in potentially conflictual situations. More specifically, they do not understand how to properly communicate with parents and involve them in areas such as curriculum, goal setting, behavioural issues, or support at home (SSTA, 1994; SSTA, 1999). According to Young, Levin and Wallin (2008), "teachers at all grade levels have ranked relations with parents as one of the most difficult aspects of their work" (p. 249).

Parents often lack the expertise and experience that is needed in important educational decision making processes. Parents themselves sometimes feel

overwhelmed and are more comfortable dealing with less pressing issues and extracurricular activities (SSTA, 1994; SSTA, 1999).

Given these barriers to parental involvement, one aspect of this study attempted to determine the extent to which involvement in, and the work of, parent-centred school partnership councils helps to offset barriers and foster parental engagement.

Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils in Canada

Parent-Centred School Partnerships in Canada have been traced back to 1895 (Bishundaval, 1995; MAPC, 2010). Bishundayal (1995) identifies Mabel Hubbard Bell as the founder of the group named the *Canadian Home and School and Parent-Teacher Federation* (CHSPTF), which became known as the *Canadian Home and School Federation* (CHSF) in 1996 (MAPC, 2010). In 1895, Mabel, a 'remarkable deaf woman' who was married to Alexander Graham Bell, brought parents of students enrolled at Baddeck Academy (Baddeck, Nova Scotia) together "to form a Parents Association that would concern itself with their children's education, needs and welfare" (Bishundaval, 1995, p. 112).

Parent-centred school partnership councils, with a variety of different names and mandates, became a more prominent part of Canadian School cultures during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although many of these advisory councils were supposed to help schools in the decision making process, they were predominantly consultative in nature (Murphy, 1991). Between 1989 and 1995, provincial governments began mandating some form of parent-centred councils in an effort to strengthen partnerships and give parents a seat at the decision-making table (Waters, 2002). In fact, parent partnership groups in all provinces have been given legislated responsibility. Councils

are expected to be committed entities that have a strong partnership with teachers, principals and divisions to bring about positive and sustainable change (Waters, 2002).

The composition of parent-centred school partnership councils throughout the provinces of Canada consist of a variety of different combination of parents, teachers, principals, non-teaching school staff, community members and students (Table 2). Generally, PCSCs in Canada are advisory in nature and have very little legislative authority (McKenna, 1998).

Unlike many developed countries, there is no national governmental agency that is responsible for educational policy. This means that PCSCs' formal roles and influences vary greatly from province to province. Some examples of roles that PCSCs take part in include helping to develop curriculum, working on goal setting, budgeting, transportation, fundraising and employment practices (McKenna, 1998). Epstein's methods of parental engagement are often incorporated into some of the activities promoted by school councils as means of establishing more broad-based parental engagement within the school from the community.

Although there is seemingly a lot of progress throughout Canada over the past three decades, it is important to note that the Provinces have individualized formal PCSCs (Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2005; Young, Levin & Wallin, 2008). Because all the provinces are unique, some have stronger PCSCs than others: some provinces have mandated PCSCs, while in others they are optional; and, some have more influence and authority than others. However, most but not all have their mandate defined as advisory rather than decision-making (Chan, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2005): Young, Levin & Wallin 2008).

Table 2**Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils in Canada, by Province & Territory**

Province Name of Council	Date	Legislation and background documents	Composition
BC School Planning Councils	2002	Bill 34 School Board Flexibility Bill	3 parents, 1 teacher, the principal
Alberta School Councils	1988 1955	School Act; revised Policy 1.8.3 (2003)	1 principal, 1 or more teachers, 1 student, parents of students in the school, another parent or community member
Saskatchewan Local School Advisory Committee, School Councils	1995 1996	Section 135, Education Act	Parents, community representatives, teachers, students and other staff
Manitoba Advisory Councils for School Leadership	1993 1995 1996	Education Administration Act	7 members with 2/3 parents and 1/3 non parents including community members. Teachers and staff may be elected but cannot comprise more than half the membership
Ontario School Councils	1995	Policy/Program Memorandum No. 122	The principal, 1 teacher, parent representatives, non-parent community members
Quebec School Governing Boards	1998	Bill 109 (1997)	Students, parents, teachers, staff and community members. Principal ex-officio.
Nova Scotia School Advisory Councils	1194 1996	Section 40A of the Education Act	Students, teachers and principal. Students may also be represented.
PEI School Councils	1993 1995	Section 66 of the School Act	
Newfoundland and Labrador School Councils	1996	Royal Commission (1992); Bill 48, Section 26 of the Education Act	Parent and community members. First Nations representation is guaranteed.
Yukon School Councils	1990	Education Act	

Source: *The evolution of professionalism* (Chan, Fisher & Rubenson (2005).

History of Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils in Manitoba

According to Madder (1963), the first Parent-Centred School Partnership in Manitoba was founded in Brandon in 1912. The initiative gained momentum throughout 1913 by providing information sessions for parents (*The Brandon Sun*, November 9, 1912; *The Brandon Sun*, October 31, 1913). Alfred White, the Superintendent of King George School in Brandon, wrote in the *Education in Manitoba Departmental Report for*

1913-14 that the purpose of participating in the Home and School Association program was threefold:

- 1) "To further all matters educational in the neighborhood of the King George School."
- 2) "To aid in all movements to provide good, pure recreation, and social and intellectual activities in the neighborhood of King George School."
- 3) To support and aid every movement promoting the existence of intelligent cooperation between the King George School and homes."

The formation of PCSCs grew throughout the province for the next couple of decades, and in 1935 a provincial body was established upon the request of a group of Winnipeg based Home and School Associations. In 1954, the Provincial body was incorporated as the Home and School Parent Teacher Federation (HSPTF) of Manitoba. In 1995, Members of the HSPTF of Manitoba voted to have their name changed to the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC, 2010).

The Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC) is described as an organization that represents parents and parent advisory councils throughout the province. This organization supports, promotes, and enhances meaningful involvement and participation of parents to improve the education and well-being of children in Manitoba (<http://www.mapc.mb.ca/aboutmapc.htm>). MAPC offers help and support to parent councils in such ways as providing presentations on holding effective meetings, helping to define roles and responsibilities of members, and ensuring financial accountability within schools (Waters, 20002).

Currently, there are four types of formalized parent-centered school partnership councils that may be established in Manitoba schools: Advisory Councils for School Leadership (ACSLs), Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), Home and School Associations (HSAs), and School Committees (SCs) (School Partnerships, 2005). The role of all formal parent organizations in education is to “enhance the quality of school programs and improve the level of student achievement in the public schools in Canada” (The Canadian Home and School Federation, 2002, p. 2). Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth echoed that sentiment in concluding, “when parents, families, and the community are involved in the education of children and youth, student achievement tends to increase; students feel more supported; (and) students’ attitudes change in a positive way” (School Partnerships, 2005, p. 5).

Throughout the 1990’s there was a significant increase in the interest of parent-school relations and shared governance (Chairney, 2000). In 1994, the Manitoba government distributed a document for educators that describe actions to be taken for “the renewal of our educational system” (Manitoba Education & Training, 1994, p. 2). The document entitled, *Renewing Education: New Directions - a Blueprint for Action*, focused on six priorities based on the vision of the government and then Minister of Education and Training, Clayton Manness. One of these priority areas was focused on parental and community involvement. One of the actions associated with this priority (New Direction 4) called for schools to allow parents to have a considerably bigger role as a school partner. According to the *Renewing Education* document, all schools would be required to establish *Advisory Councils for School Leadership (ACSLs)* upon

parents' requests. The responsibilities of ACSLs, as outlined in this initiative, were to be to:

1. Provide recommendations to the school board with respect to the process of hiring and appointing principals
2. Participate in the development of the school plan
3. Participate in the development of the school budget
4. Participate in school reviews
5. Provide recommendations to the principal regarding school matters as they arise and as requested
6. Provide pertinent and meaningful school information to their parents and community members (p. 29)

In Manitoba, education is governed primarily by *The Public Schools Act* and *The Education Administration Act* (<http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/schools/gts.html>). Both Acts include statutes with regards to parents and advisory councils. According to *The Public Schools Act*, all parents have the “right and a responsibility to be knowledgeable about and participate in the education of their children” (*The Public Schools Act, Preamble*). There are several more specific rights and responsibilities for parents as defined under this act (Appendix A), including the parental right to “be a member of an advisory council...at his or her child’s school” (*The Public School’s Act, Section 58.6 (f)*).

As stated earlier, of the four aforementioned school councils, ACSLs are the only parental group that has legislative power. ACSLs were legislated in the *Education Administration Act* on March 20, 1996 (*The Education Administration Act, C.C.S.M.*

c.E10) to represent and involve parents and community members in important decision making procedures at the school and school board levels. According to legislation, ACSLs *may* advise on the following topics: school policies, activities, and organization; fundraising; hiring and assigning principals; school budgeting; school planning; and reviewing schools as directed by the Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth, or the school board (McKenna, 1998; School Partnerships, 2005). It is important to stress that many feel that the roles of most parent advisory councils in Canada are strictly advisory (McKenna, 1998) and “the structure and the activities of the parent council must conform to any policies that the school board may have about such councils” (*Educational Administration Act*, Section 8(1)).

On April 23rd 2010, MAPC proposed a resolution that calls for *Equal Status for all Formally Recognized Parent Advisory Councils in Manitoba* (See Appendix B, MAPC Proposed Resolution,). The resolution was submitted at the 2010 Annual General Meeting by MAPC Board of Directors and calls for equal status amongst the four aforementioned PCSCs; giving Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), Home and School Associations (HSAs), and School Committees (SCs) the same status as ACSLs. The formal request reads:

Manitoba Association of Parent Councils request of the Minister of Education to revisit the 1996 ACSL legislation to recognize and support the importance and authority of all recognized Parent Advisory Councils in the province a level and consistent playing field for all forms of parental involvement in Manitoba’s public school system.

Based on the aforementioned sentiments, my study examined the organizational structure of three PCSCs in one school division, how members of the councils perceived that their councils were contributing to local schools and/or fostering parental engagement, and what, if any, changes to their roles and responsibilities might strengthen their ability to do so.

Summary

Although most people agree that parent programs that work with schools benefit the education system in general and Epstein's model suggests a variety of ways that parental engagement can be encouraged, there are several factors that serve as barriers to meaningful engagement. One avenue to address the need for parental engagement was the creation of formal PCSCs whose mandate is to work with schools to foster increased parental involvement in school governance. Provincial governments in Canada began mandating PCSCs and giving them legislated responsibility between 1989 and 1995. The plan was to strengthen the partnership between parent advisory councils and schools in order to improve student learning, foster public accountability and provide a means for local input into decision-making.

In Manitoba, there are four formalized parent-centered partnership councils, with the majority of schools utilizing Advisory Councils for School Leaders; which obtained legislative power in 1996 (McKenna, 1998). That being said, their power as per Manitoba legislation states that they 'may advise' on many important topics, including those surrounding school governance. The school councils in this study all represent Parent Advisory Councils

Chapter Three describes the qualitative methodology and methods that were used to conduct my study. The chapter also explains the means by which the data were collected, analyzed and interpreted.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This thesis reports on a qualitative study of three parent-centred school partnership councils operating within a single rural Manitoba school division. The design of this study has been guided by what Bogden (2007) suggests are five key aspects of qualitative research, namely: that it is naturalistic; that it utilizes descriptive data; that it has a deep concern for process; that data are analyzed inductively; and, that qualitative researchers seek to capture and communicate the perspectives of their subjects as accurately as possible (pp. 4-8). In exploring school council participants perspectives on the work of the councils on which they served the study sought to address three research questions:

1. How is formal parental involvement in school governance organized within the parent-centred school partnership councils of an early years school, a K-12 school and a high school (7-12) in one rural school division in Manitoba?
2. In what ways do select members of these councils perceive that their councils are contributing to their local schools and/or fostering parental engagement?
3. What, if any, changes to their roles and responsibilities would members recommend to strengthen the ability of PCSCs to contribute to their local schools and/or foster parental engagement in schooling?

This chapter outlines the research design of the study and is organized into three main sections: (i) the research sites and subjects; (ii) the research methodology; and, (ii) how the data were analyzed.

Research Sites and Subjects

Selecting Schools/Councils and Gaining Entry

The focus of this study was the operation of three parent-centred school partnership councils viewed primarily through the eyes of six people who served on those councils. The province of Manitoba has some 180,000 public school students enrolled in slightly less than 700 schools located within 37 school boards. Seven urban school divisions (six in Winnipeg and one in Brandon) account for approximately half of this student enrollment, while the remaining 30 rural school divisions account for the other half. The three councils selected for study were all located within a single rural school division. Rural school divisions in Manitoba have a unique set of challenges when it comes to parent involvement. Possibly the biggest challenge is that many students live far distances away from the school, making it difficult for parents to find the time or gas money to get to the school for school events such as PSPC meetings.

After receipt of approval from the University of Manitoba Education and Nursing Research Ethics Committee (ENREB) in May 2010 (Appendix C), the research was initiated with a written request to the Superintendent of the School Division to approach school principals and members of parent-centred school partnership councils to request their participation in the study (Appendix D). Approval from the Superintendent was received in June 2010. Once approval from the Superintendent was obtained, the schools in the division were examined with the purpose of getting a cross-section of Early Years, Middle Years³, and Senior Years representation from schools based upon

³ As noted earlier, and reflective of the diversity of different grade levels accommodated in rural schools, the school selected with middle years students was a K-12 school.

grade composition information available on the school division's website. When this was done, one school/school council from each level was selected randomly and the principal contacted by telephone to introduce myself, briefly describe my research project and to seek permission to work with the parent-centred school partnership council at the school. At this stage in this process no attempt was made to establish what sort of council was in place at each school or to seek any information about the mandate or vitality of the councils.

By the second week of September, 2011, permission was granted by each of the first three principals contacted to approach the chairperson of the school's Parent Advisory Council to request permission to attend an upcoming council meeting where I could provide council members with an outline of the purpose and methods of my research and request their participation in the study. Approval was granted by the chairpersons and in the Fall of 2010 I attended council meetings at all three schools to outline my research. Letters of Consent were left with all of the council members and I left with the understanding that the Chairperson would get back to me to let me know whether or not all members of council were willing to be involved in the study. By January 10, 2011 all council members had given approval for me to observe one of their meetings and most/all had indicated their willingness to be interviewed.

The Councils

The three Parent Advisory Councils that I researched are affiliated with schools located in small rural towns that are located in a triangle with approximately 35 miles between them. The schools have similar demographics and socioeconomic status. All three could be considered farming communities, with a large portion of their student

population travelling via school bus to and from school. The Kindergarten (K) to Grade 5 school has an enrolment of approximately 450 children; the K to Grade 12 school has approximately 200 children enrolled; and the Grade 7-12 school has approximately 240 students.

Interview Participants

During the initial K-5 meeting, that I attended to introduce myself and give the parameters of the study, there were 11 attendees. There were 8 parents who were all mothers; 1 male School Board Trustee; the Principal who is female; and a female teacher representative. After I left the meeting, all attendees signed consent forms agreeing to take part in the observation portion of this study. Of the eight parents, only one declined the option to be interviewed. The other seven indicated they would be willing to be interviewed.

When I attended their next meeting to complete my observation, it was a much different group of people. Ten people attended, with only three of the same parents; four were new. Again, all were mothers. The same Principal and Teacher Representative attended, but there was a different School Board Trustee. The Chairperson of the PAC debriefed the attendees as to why I was there. She basically said, I was there to observe them for my thesis and that I would be seeking approval to interview them afterwards. After her brief introduction, I did explain more of the study and went through the consent form with them. They quickly signed the forms, and the meeting continued. Of the 11 people who signed consent forms, only three indicated they would not be willing to be interviewed. I chose to interview two of the three parents that were at both meetings.

The K-12 school and the 7-12 school that I studied had very similar numbers take part in their PAC meetings. The K-12 school had three mothers, one principal, and one teacher representative attend the first meeting I attended. During the second meeting, the same number of people attended, with the only difference being there was one different mother. All PAC members agreed to be observed for this study, and all the mothers agreed to be interviewed if chosen to do so. I chose to interview the two parents who attended both meetings.

The 7-12 school had similar numbers, but dissimilar attendees – particularly at the first meeting. At the preliminary meeting, where I introduced myself and explained the study, there was a married couple who were parents of children attending the school and there were also two community members who each had three children who had graduated several years ago. A Principal along with a Teacher Representative attended both meetings.

I contacted the Principal approximately a week later and he told me that the group had agreed to take part in this study. I came back to observe the following month. The mother who attended the first meeting was present, but her husband was not. Only one of the two community members returned, as one gave her resignation after I had left the first meeting. There was a new member who had attended because her daughter just started attending the school and she wanted to get more information about the school. I chose to interview the parent (mother) who was at both meetings, along with the community member who attended both. Although all the participants who were observed agreed to do so by signing the consent form, only the two that I interviewed agreed to take part in that portion of the study.

The participants that I interviewed shared two traits: 1) they attended both meetings; 2) they signed the consent form agreeing to take part in the interview process. Once two members from each council were selected to be interviewed, they were contacted by telephone and a meeting time and place was established. Three council members traveled to the school where I worked to be interviewed, one met me at a restaurant in her home town, one met me at her place of employment on a Saturday, and another met me at her home school in the library.

Data Collection

This study utilized a combination of qualitative techniques to collect data. First I observed three scheduled parent council meetings. Subsequent to attending these meetings, I conducted one-on-one interviews with two members from each of the three parent-centred school partnership councils that I had observed.

Observations

In this study I attended two meetings for each Parent-Centred School Partnership Councils. However, during the first meeting with each PCSC, I only attended for approximately ten minutes to seek consent to commence my study with them, which included an observation and interviews. The second time I attended a PCSC meeting, I was a complete non-participant observer - one who was detached from directly participating in the observation. Each observation took place where the PCSCs normally met, and the entire council meeting was recorded using a digital audio recorder and microphone. There is no separate analysis of my observations of these meetings, but they served an important function of introducing myself to the council members and to sensitize myself to the workings of each council ahead of the individual interviews.

Interviews

I interviewed two members of each of the three parent-centred school partnership councils that I studied using a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured questions are open-ended but purposeful; and allow for probing, follow-up and clarification (McMillan, 2004).

The questions were constructed to inform the study's research questions and sequenced in such a way as to move from general concerns of interest intended to facilitate a dialogue to questions that required more reflection or probing more deeply into the topic of study. Questions were guided by the framework and criteria outlined in *A Policy Maker's Guide, Parent and Teacher Views on Education* (Guppy, 2005). In an effort to ensure that my questions lacked bias, I asked open answered questions, which did not 'lead' the participants to answer questions in a certain direction.

Interview Questions: In this study, the members of parent-centred school partnership councils who were interviewed provided their perceptions related to a set of questions designed collectively to address the study three research questions. The interview questions and their connection to the study's research questions are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Interview Questions and Research Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
<p>Research Question #1: How is formal parental involvement in school governance organized within the parent-centred school partnership councils of an early years school, a K-12 school, and a high school (7-12) in one rural school division in Manitoba?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you get involved in the Parent Advisory Council? 2. What kind of Parent Advisory Council does your school have? How was it established? 3. How is your Parent Advisory Council and its meetings typically organized? 4. On average, how many people do you have attend your meetings? 5. What formal positions do you have within the PAC? 6. How do you go about creating an agenda? What does a typical meeting look like?
<p>Research Question #2: In what ways do select members of these councils perceive that their councils are contributing to their schools and/or fostering parental engagement?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. What would you say your roles and responsibilities have been as a member of your PAC? Please consider the following: (i) fostering good parenting; (ii) communicating; (iii) volunteering; (iv) fostering learning at home; (v) decision-making; and, (vi) collaborating with the community. 8. What are some of the changes, initiatives or projects that your PAC has been involved in that you are most proud of? 9. What kind of impact do you believe that your PAC has had on how the school functions?
<p>Research Question #3: What, if any, changes to their roles and responsibilities would members recommend to strengthen the ability of parent councils to contribute to their local schools and/or foster parental engagement in schooling?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. How closely do you work with Administrators, Teachers and the School Board? How do you think that your work could be made more meaningful with each group? 11. What do you think your roles as a PAC member should include? What should you be doing less of? What should you be doing more of? 12. What suggestions might you make to help facilitate the work of Parent Councils? 13. Did you receive any training for your role on a PAC? If so, could you describe what it entailed? If not, what sort of training do you think would be beneficial?

Data Analysis

The six interviews lasted between 27 and 42 minutes each. I asked each participant the same 13 questions that were linked to the three main overriding questions this thesis examines (See Table 3). I recorded my questions along with their responses using a digital recorder. Each interview was transcribed word for word using a computer. To help organize the information and to begin the analysis process, I then summarized each of the participant’s transcribed answers under each research question and in relation to specific interview questions and organized them into a series of large tables. These tables provided a summary of the raw interview data organized by individual interviewee and by school council. The tables, (Table 4) were then used to identify reoccurring themes - information that seemed to be important either because it was unusual, or because it addressed issues found in my Literature Review. These themes, clustered as responses to each Research Question then provided the structure for presenting the findings from this research, presented in Chapter 4.

Table 4
Example of the Tables used to Code Information:
Summaries of respondents’ answers to each interview question

Question #1: How did you get involved in the Parent Council?

K-5 (1) Response	K-5 (2) Response	7-12 (1) Response	7-12 (2) Response	K-12 (1) Response	K-12 (2) Response
-probably read it in a newsletter -wanted to know more about what was going on in the school. -just attended a meeting	-son as ADHD, behavior problems -went to the first meeting when we moved to town last year -It was in the school newsletter.	-When my kids started school, I heard about the PAC and decided to see what was involved. -It was important for parent input, to get involved with the PAC in the school and meeting new parents as well.	-I was volunteering in the school quite often and the principal there invited me to a PAC meeting. -I started going and I have been involved ever since. -It’s been, I would say, 19 years.	-It was just how the school division was spending money and a lot of people were in an uproar -a friend of mine had a daughter that was in the school and he was starting to develop a parent advisory committee. -My daughter was beginning kindergarten that fall, so naturally I was intrigued	-Conversations with other parents. -They encouraged me to go.

Summary

Chapter Three described the methods that I used to conduct my study. I observed three different PAC meetings, and then interviewed two PAC members from each council. Using tables, I compared and contrasted the information to find common themes and important information.

Chapter Four describes the results I found from conducting my observations and interviews. Chapter Five describes my conclusions based on the findings of my study, recommendations for theory, practice and research, and a personal reflection for my own future practice.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

Since the early 1990s Manitoba Education has stressed the importance of, and sought to promote, strong relationships between schools, families and communities. The Progressive Conservative government of Gary Filmon established a legislative framework for Advisory Councils for School Leadership in 1996, and the New Democratic Government lists strengthening links among families, schools and communities as one of its six priorities for public education in the province. This study has as its focus parental involvement as evidenced in three parent-centred school partnership councils within a single Manitoba rural school division, and the extent to which they might be seen as contributing to the operation of the schools where they are located. Specifically, the study sought to address three research questions:

1. How is formal parental involvement in school governance organized within the parent councils of an early years school, a K-12 school and a high school (7-12) school in one rural school division in Manitoba?
2. In what ways do select members of these councils perceive that their councils are contributing to their local schools and/or fostering parental engagement?
3. What, if any, changes to their roles and responsibilities would members recommend to strengthen the ability of parent councils to contribute to their local schools and/or foster parental engagement in schooling?

During the 2010-11 school year I observed one parent-centred school partnership meeting at each of the schools and interviewed two council members from each school in order address these research questions. This chapter reports on the findings from these observations and interviews.

The following sections outline a number of themes identified from this data and link them to each of the research questions. Though I had intended to (and originally did) organize my findings according to level of school, the small number of participants interviewed meant that they might be too readily identifiable if I presented the information by school level. Overall, there were few consistencies or patterns determinable based on level of school, though where they appeared significant I have attempted to draw attention to them in the findings.

Research Question #1: How is formal parental involvement in school governance organized within the parent councils of a K-5 school, a K-12 School, and a 7-12 school in one rural school division in Manitoba?

The Nature and Establishment of the Local Parent Council

The revision to the *Public Schools Act* passed in 1996, and the subsequent *Regulation 54/96*, provided a mechanism for parents to require the establishment of Advisory Councils for School Leadership in their schools and a legislated framework that defined the membership and mandate of such councils. However, in none of the three schools studied in this research had parents initiated the process of establishing an ACSL, but instead each school had established a Parent Advisory Council (PAC)

which was regulated, not by any specific provincial legislation or regulation but rather by local school board and school policies and traditions.

When asked, none of the council members interviewed seemed to be certain of which kind of parent-centred school partnership council they were involved in, nor did they indicate a knowledge that there was more than one type of parent-centred school partnership council available to schools in the province. Most seemed to be familiar with the terms “parent councils” or “parent advisory councils”; only one had even heard of an “advisory council for school leadership,” which was the label she used to describe her PCSC even though it had not been formally constituted as such.

In my efforts to fully determine what kind of PCSC each council was, I requested copies of their constitutions initially through my interviewees and where that was unsuccessful, either through the PAC chairperson or the school principal. One of the K-5 school’s participants sent me an electric copy of its constitution via e-mail a day after my request. The K-5 school is referred to as a PAC throughout its constitution. It was very difficult to track down any type of constitution for both the K-12 and the 7-12 schools’ councils; even after contacting both interviewees and the current principals of each school. I did finally receive a constitution from the K-12 school, ambiguously entitled “School Advisory Council for School Leadership – Parent Advisory Council”, but with an organizational structure indicating that it was constituted as a PAC and not an ACSL. None of my efforts with the 7-12 school was able to uncover any written constitution for its current PCSC.

When asked how their council was established, two common themes emerged: both K-5 participants and one K-12 participant did not know how they were established

and the others believed the groups were created based on directives from the province of Manitoba or the school division. Consequently, the findings suggest that parents in this school division are not familiar with the legislation or the history around the development of parent-centred school partnership councils and the fact that their groups are not constituted as Advisory Councils for School Leadership may serve to limit the legitimacy of their voice and their effective engagement across a range of school-related activities.

Formal Positions

Although each of the interview participants identified formal roles in their PCSC, (see Table 3) they also reported that two of the three schools never had enough people to fill all of these positions.

Table 5
Parent Advisory Council Officers

K-5	K-12	7-12
Chairperson	Chairperson	Chairperson
Vice-Chairperson		Vice-Chairperson
Treasurer	Treasurer	Treasurer
Secretary	Secretary	Secretary
Teacher Rep		Teacher Rep
Principal	Principal	Principal
Voting Members		Voting Members
	Student Parliament Rep	

The K-12 and the 7-12 schools only had two to four attendees at each of the meetings I attended. One of the 7-12 interviewees told me that one lady took on three positions: Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. She added, “She takes over everything now,”

Of the three schools that took part in this study, the Kindergarten to Grade 5 school had the most people attend PAC meetings. However, positions were noted by all interviewees to be hard to fill. One of the K-5 interviewees laughed as she stated, “I basically became the Chair (person) because I showed up to a meeting and the Chair (person) wanted out and bullied me into it.” The other K-5 participant explained there had been no Treasurer for a year and was asked if she “could be the Treasurer.” She said she replied, “Ok, what do I do?” Two other interviewees explained that all of the positions had to be appointed rather than elected, because of their lack of attendees. It is important to note that each PSPC also had the principal attend meetings each month as an ex officio, non-voting member. However, the interviewees, as discussed later, believed that all decisions were finalized by the principal, and warned against upsetting him or her.

Two of the interviewees acknowledged the problem of having very few members, and admitted it was tough to get anything done with the low number of members in attendance at meetings. One lady from the 7-12 school stated, “we have done nothing lately, because what can you do with only three people showing up?” Significantly, during my observation of the 7-12 school there was talk of the parent council dissolving due to the frustration with low attendance and apparent apathy. Another member from

the K-12 school stated, “there has been no progress (in increasing the number of participants) in the last three years even with (invitations in) the newsletters.”

The attendees at the PAC meetings I attended were almost exclusively female. Of the six meetings I attended there was one parent who was a male - a father who attended with his wife. Not only was there a great gender imbalance in general attendance, but females also held down all of the formal roles that were established in each council.

Meeting Organization

The three parent councils I observed meet on a set date once a month during the evening. That is, one group met on the first Monday, one on the third Wednesday, and the other on the second Monday of every month. The start times were either 6:30 or 7:00 p.m.

Each group had a set agenda that it followed throughout the meeting. The agendas typically included reports from each representative. All of the agendas included old business, new business, a treasurer’s report, and a principal’s report. The elementary and K-12 school councils had teacher reports and correspondence in their agendas; and the 7-12 school parent council had a student parliament report included in its agenda. However, as an interviewee from the grade 7-12 school stated, student parliament members almost never attended, and rarely if ever had a report prepared to share.

The meetings were almost entirely informational; members simply relayed their reports. There was no discussion over concerns or topics, educational or otherwise, nor were there requests for feedback during the meetings. In each case, one person

relayed information, and would clarify points when asked questions. Based on my observations, there was no evidence of decision making, which is further discussed later in this chapter.

Meeting Attendance

The number of parents involved in the Parent Councils I observed was extremely low. In order to illustrate this idea, I used a ratio comparing the total number of students in the school to the number of parents. For example, if there were 1000 students in a school, and only ten parents attended, the ratio would be 10:1000 or 1:100. This very simple formula does not take into account factors such as the number of parents per household or the number of students from the school who are brothers and/or sisters from the same family. The K-5 PCSC was the best attended by parents with an approximate ratio of 1:50; the 7-12 school had an approximate ratio of 1:80; and the K-12 school had an approximate ratio of 1:100.

In discussing these low participation rates, three of the interviewees felt that they were not necessarily negative, in that they believed the low attendance reflected the fact that there were no major problems at their schools. These respondents felt if major problems existed, there would be a much greater turn out for parent council meetings. One lady representing the 7-12 school stated, "I've learned that if not many (parents) show up that means that things are going well, and if a bunch show up that means that there's problems." Another from the K-12 school echoed the sentiment by describing times when they had 10-15 parents attend meetings due to major concerns. However, another parent, from the 7-12 school contradicted those opinions by stating, "a quiet public does not mean a happy public."

In summary, the findings reported above suggest that in these three rural schools parents have not chosen to take advantage of the provisions of *Regulation 54/96* to establish legally prescribed Advisory Councils for School Leadership (ACSLs) (and may in fact be unaware that such provisions exist). Instead each school has a less structured Parent Advisory Council that participants indicate: has difficulty finding people willing to take on the official positions of the Council; has few other parents or community members attend their meetings; and performs a very limited, largely information sharing role. While some participants saw the Councils as serving a valuable role that did not require continual high levels of participation but rather provided a form that parents could access when there were perceived problems in the school, other questioned the utility of the Councils in their current state.

Research Question #2: In what ways do select members of these councils perceive that their councils are contributing to their local schools and/or fostering parental engagement?

Impact

I asked the participants about the impact they believe their Parent Council had on how the school functions. Four of six insisted they had a positive impact on the school. However, there were some differences in the reasons why participants believed SCPCs were deemed to be important to their respective schools.

One of the K-5 participants thought the importance of her PAC related to fundraising and hinged on filling monetary gaps for items and events for which the

administration wasn't able to pay. She thought that their help with proposals and grant writing was very important in this regard. One K-12 participant thought that PACs were helpful because of their ability to bring in new ideas to the school. The other K-12 participant suggested that PACs served an important communication role and were important for keeping the school's practices open and transparent to the community. She stated, "If it wasn't for us (the school) would kind of be a fortress."

Two of the participants weren't as positive with their answers to the aforementioned question. One lady from the 7-12 school felt they were only as useful as their principal or trustees would allow by simply stating, "It depends on the administrator of the school, and maybe the school board." The other K-5 participant didn't feel she had as much impact as she'd like. She talked about how she wished her PAC meetings were more of an "open discussion," and stated she actually has more influence as a mother who works with the principal one on one than she does as a PAC member working within the committee.

Roles and Responsibilities of Parent Advisory Councils

I asked each of the participants to describe the nature of their roles on the Parent Council. I suggested that they focus on Epstein's framework of the Six Types of Involvement that are categorized as: *parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community*. According to Epstein (2009), each type may lead to different results for students, parents and staff members. Using this model, schools can examine each 'type' and select the practices that they believe will help them achieve the goals they set for success. Using this framework, I

broke down my findings and linked them to each of the types of involvement to see where their efforts were seen to be contributing.

Fostering good parenting. The participants from the K-5 and K-12 parent councils stated that their PAC helped in the area of fostering good parenting. One participant illustrated how her PAC helped in the area of fostering good parenting when PAC members aided with the protocols around H1N1. Another said that recently her PAC brought in a guest speaker to inform parents about internet safety. In addition, two participants said they tried getting information to parents by hosting an information session and, “at one point we put things in the bulletin.” Another example of *fostering good parenting* that one of the interviewees offered had to do with head lice. She told me that the PAC called all of the parents and told them that there was an outbreak of head lice at school, and how they could best deal with the issue in a preventative and ongoing manner. They also put ‘tips’ and ‘updates’ into the school’s newsletter.

Communicating. Each of the PACs had information put forth in newsletters that were sent out to parents. The K-5 PAC had its own newsletter, which was used to report meeting minutes, share information, and attempt to recruit PAC members and school volunteers. The Chairperson of the K-5 PAC also included her home phone number and e-mail address so readers could contact her to further discuss information. The 7-12 school and the K-12 school PACs did not publish its own newsletter but added information into their school’s monthly newsletter, which are both published on the schools’ websites. The 7-12 school used newsletters to share information and look for PAC members and school volunteers.

One of the 7-12 participants agreed that she thought that the PAC should be a liaison between parents and the principal and school division. She thought that her role, as a parent whose children had graduated from secondary school, would be better suited as an ambassador who linked community members, business people, and parents to the Principal and School Board. She added, "There are a lot of great things going on that nobody in the community know about." All three PACs that were studied had members state that they represent the school's parents at meetings. They explained that parents often call them via telephone or stop to talk to them out in the community about things that are going on at school. One of the 7-12 interviewees also stated that they have full access to the school's reader board sign to communicate with passing vehicles outside the school. The 'reader board' is a sign outside the school that is used to list important dates, events and general information.

Volunteering. Five of the six participants explained that their group takes part in many volunteer initiatives by making comments such as, "we do a lot of that" and "of course, we [PAC members] all volunteer in this building..." Overall, the volunteer work the PACs acknowledged mostly had to do with fundraising. One of the K-5 participants told me that all the fundraising in her school was organized by the PAC, and that she volunteers so often that the students think she is a staff member! Another member of the K-12 school stated, "we pretty much just do fundraising." Some of the examples of the fundraising initiatives the interviewees organized and implemented were hotdog sales, hot chocolate sales, festivals, and thematic seasonal activities to help raise money, such as a haunted house at Halloween,

During another part of the interview, the participants were asked, “In what changes, initiatives or projects has your PAC been involved in of which you are most proud?” Five of the interviewees talked about fundraising projects of which their PAC has been a part. Three of the five talked exclusively about fundraising and named it as such; two others talked about money they helped raise to put towards things such as science labs, playgrounds and soccer pitches.

One of the 7-12 participants, although she mentioned fundraising, talked about other initiatives as well. She mentioned volunteer programs that they helped run in the school, and gave the lunch program as an example. She also talked about giving her own time to help get a principal hired (as discussed later). She said “that was one of my proud things I was involved in.” Another interviewee from the K-12 school, who also mentioned fundraising, said that she was also proud of “making the environment safer and better for our students.”

As Epstein has pointed out (1994), volunteering can include more than just fundraising. She wrote by way of illustration that, schools can “recruit and organize parent help and support (p. 85)” so they can volunteer in such ways as aiding in the schools and classrooms; helping teachers, administrators, students and other parents; creating and using phone trees to provide all families with valuable information; and, becoming patrols/monitors to help with the safety and operation of school programs (Epstein, 1995).

Fostering learning at home. There was very little information provided by participants related to PAC members’ roles in fostering learning at home. There were a couple of definitive ‘no’s’ when asked if PAC members help foster learning at home as a

PC collective. One participant went on to say, “that would be for the principal to bring up in his principal’s report.” Only one parent acknowledged a role for PAC members in fostering learning at home by means of modeling. She explained, “As a membership, what we do and how our kids achieve is a model for the parents.”

Decision-making. The information provided by participants with regards to decision-making was similar across each school setting. Consistent with their title as *advisory* councils, participants stated that *at times* they are given the opportunity to have input into decisions, but they do not control the outcome in many decisions, as the school principal invariably has the final say.

One of the K-5 participants stated that she had no input lately in decision-making at the school, but then went on to elaborate on her prior role on the hiring committee for the vice principal of the school a few years ago. She indicated that she felt that her voice had been respected throughout that process. Overall, however, she stated that their PACs decision making opportunities were very minimal as of late, except for the odd time the administrator came to the meetings to ask for feedback on events or initiatives. She further commented, “we vote but an administrator still has to approve what we’re doing.” A member from the 7-12 PAC echoed that sentiment by simply stating, members “help” with the decisions that are made at the school.

A PAC member from the 7-12 school also felt that the PAC’s decision-making role had diminished over the years. She indicated that members used to have a “huge” role, and clarified her statement in a subsequent example by describing the role the PAC played in the hiring of a principal at the school. She explained that she had really enjoyed that process, but then described her frustration when PAC members were not

invited to help out when the division hired the school's next principal. She suggested that this change in practice was related to the diminishing sense of power held by PACs reinforced by the low number of parents who attend PAC meetings. She claimed, "less parents just don't have the weight."

The second participant from the K-5 school suggested that PAC members had been provided with decision-making opportunities and relayed the example of being asked to provide feedback for her school's new report cards. However, she too stated members have little input in decision-making and alluded to the principal as having the final say. She added, "The biggest difficulty I have is keeping the principal happy, because if you (upset) the principal, you're done because they give approval."

A participant from the K-12 school had a similar answer. She stated, "Definitely. I'd say that's probably the most frequent role that we have." She echoed the sentiments of her PAC colleague by stating members do not make the decisions, but they do provide input into decisions, after which the administration makes the decision. She made a strong statement showing her frustration by concluding, "Ultimately the principal has the final say and we know that."

Collaborating with the community. Two participants offered insight when asked if they collaborate with the community. One stated that community members were welcome to attend meetings, but "they just don't." The other described the school as being their community center. She said, "Everybody of all ages uses the school," and even went as far to say, "The school *is* the community."

One participant provided a very strong example of *collaborating with the community*. She talked about how her PAC helped rid the school of a major head lice

problem. Her group was so frustrated with, what she called “no strong leadership,” that PAC members took it upon themselves to rectify the situation. They gathered information about what was happening and distributed it to parents via telephone and through newsletters. They then invited government agencies to help them develop protocols and policies to relay to the parents and school staff members. She said, there was no strong leadership and, “enough was enough...parents stepped in and in very little time there was no problem.” This was the strongest (and most passionately answered) example mentioned by any of the participants, probably because this was an issue during which parents were meaningfully engaged in trying to establish change.

In summary, the findings related to Research Question #2 suggest that despite the overall low levels of parental participation on Parent Advisory Councils in the three schools studied; the Council members interviewed were able to identify activities that the Parent Advisory Councils had undertaken across each of Epstein’s six categories of involvement. The interviews suggested that Parent Advisory Councils did in fact serve as a focal point for a small number of interested and active parents (and “former parents”) to undertake a relatively small number of important activities and roles that fostered a degree of parental involvement and contributed to the well-being of their schools.

Within the families, communities, and school partnership literature a number of authors have highlighted the fact that effective parental engagement with schools usually benefits from training activities that allow parents to acquire appropriate skills and knowledge. The section below addresses interviewee’s comments on their training and preparation associated with their involvement on their school’s PAC.

Research Question #3: What, if any, changes to their roles and responsibilities would members recommend to strengthen the ability of parent councils to contribute to their local schools and/or foster parental engagement in schooling?

In order to explore with the participants in this research study their views on how the parent centred school participation councils that they were members on might be strengthened, three clusters of interview questions were posed: (i) “what do you think your role as a PAC member should be”; (ii) “how closely do you as a PAC member work with your school’s administrators and teachers, and the school board” and “how might that be more meaningful”; and, finally, (iii) “what suggestions do you have to facilitate the work of Parent Advisory Councils?” An account of participants’ responses to these three sets of questions is provided below.

What the role of a Parent-Centred School Partnership Council should be

To find out how PAC members thought they could strengthen their committee, participants were asked two questions: “what do you think your roles should be”, and “is there anything you think you should be doing more of or less of”? The six interviewees had diverse insight into what their beliefs were about what their roles should be. One of the K-12 interviewees explained, “A lot of people think it’s just fundraising or holding hotdog days... that’s not what the primary function is, but I think it’s evolving more into that.” However, one of the K-5 interviewees thought fundraising was a good role for them. She stated, “I personally like just dealing with fundraising. Some of the issues coming to our table could be non-pleasant issues...” Apparently this participant felt safer avoiding issues that had the potential to be divisive and therefore

was satisfied with having primarily a fundraising role. This view certainly is not the intent of PSPC development within the philosophy behind parental engagement and Manitoba's legislative documents, but it does speak to Epstein's model in as much as that this model provides a framework for each school to develop a uniquely structured program of parental engagement based on the needs of individual schools.

All of the K-5 and K-12 interviewees expressed the view that they would welcome an increased role in the decision making process at the school. One commented that she would like to be more involved in the decision-making and collaborating aspect of school governance. A second stated that the administration has to work with parents to solve problems. The third agreed by stating, "having the community feedback into the decision making of the school...is very important for a rural school in particular." Finally, the fourth interviewee thought parents should have a stronger voice on topics such as budgeting, staffing and working on the student dress code. Each of these views of an increased mandate for parent councils would be consistent with the rationale provided for the establishment of Advisory Councils for School Leadership in Manitoba.

Another reoccurring theme throughout the interview had to do with the importance of PCSC meetings as a forum for parents to bring up school-related issues and concerns. Three of the interviewees had strong beliefs that parents should be able to bring up and discuss school issues and concerns at their PAC meetings in order to help solve those problems. One of the K-5 participants along with a 7-12 participant stated they would like to see the meetings as an 'open forum,' and supported the sentiments of the other 7-12 interviewee who stated:

Parents should have the right to express any concerns that they have

with the school and how it's run. All of the questions by parents should be answered, and any questions should not be judged in the negative way.

Three interviewees brought up the need for increasing the number of parents who are involved in the PSPCs. One of the K-5 participants stated she'd like to see more volunteers help out. A K-12 member elaborated that, "As a group we should be encouraging parents to become more involved into our children's lives." A 7-12 representative said pointedly, "what can you do with three (members)?"

Working with Administrators, Teachers, and the School Board

Responses to the second cluster of questions asked, that related to each PAC's working relationships with school administrators, teachers and the school board are reported here.

Administrators. When asked how closely the PAC members worked with their administrators, the answers varied greatly. The elementary PAC representatives answered, "quite a bit," and "very, very close." One explained that their PAC always has an administrator present at monthly PC meetings, and the other said she talked to her administrator weekly. However, two from the 7-12 school and one from K-12 stated that they did not work closely with their administrators at all. One of the participants from the 7-12 school elaborated by stating, "it depends who the administrator is."

There were diverse answers when they were asked about the nature of their work with the principal. Two women described their work for all three of the partners very similarly. One interviewee from the K-12 school stated that parents advise, assist, and support each of the groups (administrators, teachers and the school division). She

added, “when it comes to working with all three of these groups we are pretty open minded. We listen to ideas and information and try to work with them as to benefit the children.” One of the K-5 PAC members felt that it was her responsibility to initiate conversations with her administrator. None of the participants provided much depth or detail to what such support entailed, and/or the nature of the initiatives about which such support was undertaken.

There were few suggestions when the participants were asked how their work with administrators could be made more meaningful. Three interviewees had very diverse suggestions. One thought that there had to be better communication. She elaborated by explaining that parents need to be informed about what is happening in schools. One of the women suggested that their work could be made more meaningful (within all these groups) if they continued to be involved with each of them and showed they respected what each partner has to offer. Finally, one interviewee stated that administrators (and the other two groups) needed to take PSPCs more seriously, and put forth an effort to get the ‘proper’ group together.

Teachers. When I asked the interviewees how closely they worked with teachers, two of the interviewees clearly stated ‘no’ they did not work closely with teachers at all, with one of the K-5 representatives elaborating by saying, “I don’t even know half the staff.” Three of the participants, one from each school, said they worked only with the teacher representatives who attended their PAC meetings.

One participant from the K-12 school had a very unique answer when asked about how closely she worked with the teaching staff. She started by telling me that teachers were more cautious than administrators or school board members when

working with their school's PAC. She said that when teachers do bring up a concern to her PAC, it's usually a very serious one. She stated, "In my experience (it's usually) a last ditch effort because nothing else worked." She also stated that "teachers don't often complain." Furthermore, this woman was the only one who talked about being the initiator when working with teachers. That is, she stated that she approaches teachers and asks them if there is anything the PAC needed to help them with monetarily. She said that some of the teachers do ask for help, but others, particularly new teachers, never ask for help with anything.

When asked about the nature of their work with teachers, there wasn't much feedback. Two participants talked about fundraising. One of the K-5 interviewees talked about the team effort between teachers and parents over fundraising. She said that the teachers distributed the information and provided descriptions of events or initiatives to their classes. The other K-5 representative said that teachers allowed their students out of their rooms during class times to help out with PAC sponsored events. A participant from the K-12 school broadly stated that teachers helped by "mostly assisting and supporting." The responses were very similar to those with regards to working with the administrators in the school, with all basically suggesting that there are not very close relationships with teachers or administrators except in very disconnected ways primarily related to fundraising (and this from the representatives from the elementary and K-12 schools). There was very little feedback from the PSPC representatives when asked how their work could be made more meaningful with teachers. The only suggestion was to have "better communication."

The school board. Participants were asked how closely their PSPC groups worked with the school board. Four of the interviewees didn't feel they worked very closely with the school board and school board officials. Three of them insisted that there was not much contact with the school division at all. The fourth, a 7-12 representative, told me, "our role has diminished." She went on to tell me that she was invited to help hire a new principal a few years back, but then the next time the PAC had no say whatsoever in the hiring process. She stated, "they didn't even talk to us; they just hired someone."

One participant had a different view. She stated PAC members did work with the school board. She said that the board sent her PAC financial reports, and that they were invited to divisional meetings. She claimed there was some communication between the school board and her PAC. She also pointed out that there's a school trustee who attends their meetings on behalf of the school board.

I then asked each of the interviewees to describe the nature of their work with the school board. A K-12 representative stated that the division hosts 'DPAC' (Divisional Parent Advisory Council) meetings once a year. She believed these meetings were helpful for new PSPC members, but they became a waste of time for her. She believed that a lot of the information board members bring up at these meetings are already addressed by her in her PAC. She stated, "we sit there and think, all these brilliant ideas we're doing already."

Two participants had suggestions when asked how they could make their work more meaningful when working with their school board. One simply stated, "better communication." This person wanted to attend more Divisional Parent Advisory Council

meetings. A second participant's answer had to do with training PSPC members. She thought that the school division could train PSPC members in the "purpose and function of an advisory council." She elaborated, "If they did that, then I think some of the other things they're trying to accomplish in these meetings would actually happen." Once again, however, it appears that PSPC members do not have an actual working relationship with the board, as much as they are provided with information (which they often feel is irrelevant or unnecessary) when (or if) they attend the DPAC meetings. Generally, meaningful work relationships appear to be missing between the PSPCs and all three stakeholders.

Facilitating the Work of Parent Councils

The final interview question asked participants for suggestions to help facilitate the work of Parent Councils. They had numerous suggestions to offer in response to this question - which was reinforced by a 7-12 participant who stated, "I have hundreds of them." The most consistent answer was that of getting more parents involved with PSPC's. Four of the interviewees made this suggestion (the elementary and high school council representatives), though they were less vocal in terms of how to make this happen. One K-5 member suggested that PSPCs could get more parents involved by encouraging a parent from each classroom or grade to attend. Another stated, "it's a dream for every PAC I believe."

Another reoccurring theme had to do with communication. One participant stated there needs to be better communication between the principal and PSPC; and between the school division and PSPCs. A second participant agreed by stating there has to be more communication "between everyone."

Two participants brought up the communication process at meetings. A K-5 member and 7-12 member thought there should be more open discussion during the meetings. The 7-12 member suggested more parents would come if they had the freedom to have their voices heard. She said, “If a parent has a concern, they want to come to the PAC, they want to bring it up with people, and they’re shut down...”

One participant suggested that PSPC members should make efforts to meet with members from other PSPC’s. She thought information and idea sharing around areas such as fundraising and general improvements would be helpful. She also thought they should ‘extend terms of membership’ or re-examine the organization of meetings because there may be more volunteers willing to help out if they didn’t have to attend monthly PSPC meetings.

One of the K-5 participants had several suggestions. First, she insisted that “the only way it works” is if you are able to contact the person/people who had your role prior. For example, if someone took on the role of treasurer, that person needs to be able to contact the preceding treasurer to guide him/her until he/she fully understood the duties. A second suggestion she had was to create a manual to help new members – she said this probably topped her list. This respondent said there just wasn’t enough time during a meeting to describe and explain everything PAC members were talking about; and a lot of the information provided to them was often ‘over their heads.’ She described the PSPC as, “almost like a boys club that you gotta fit in, and you don’t understand the game they’re talking about.”

Another participant suggested that administrators, teachers and school board members should stress the importance of PSPC’s to the school community. Such a

comment alludes to an idea that PSPC's are not granted much legitimacy within the school division. She also thought that there has to be an environment created that encourages parents to speak up on issues, similarly discussed above. She thinks parents are generally skeptical of the credibility and authenticity of meaningful engagement opportunities provided to (or by) the PSPC's, which aligns with much of the literature on the authenticity (or lack thereof, in parental engagement in school governance) (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2008).

Two of the participants had very brief answers. One K-12 interviewee thought that access to a small budget would be helpful. She used her increased personal phone bill from calling other PAC members as an example. The other K-12 participant stated parents have to listen to the needs of the school and ensure that the decisions are made with the best interest of the children in mind.

Training

When initially asked about any training that they had received, five of the six participants said that they had never received any formal training for their roles as PAC members. However, as the interviews progressed, some did allude to training opportunities of which they were, in fact, a part. That is, one K-5 representative commented that a few years ago her PAC had someone come in and conduct a workshop on how to run a meeting. The other person from the K-5 PAC said she was trained in the role of treasurer by the past treasurer.

The sixth participant, who was a member of the K-12 school council, explained that when she started as a PSPC member there existed ample training and training materials. She attended workshops in Winnipeg, which she found very useful and

argued that all present PSPC members should attend such training activities. She claimed, “new people don’t realize what an Advisory Council is.” From the information I gathered from this individual, it seems that she may have joined the PSPC in the mid to late 1990s when ACSLs were new and heavily supported by provincial orientation programs. The same participant felt there wasn’t any recent training from the school division because the school board did not want strong Parent Councils. She said:

I think that the school divisions are afraid to train Advisory Councils, because when they did that initially, you had councils that were pretty strong; and it’s been fairly diluted over the years. But, the initial Advisory Councils had some, I don’t want to say power, but were given more consideration from the government.

There were various suggestions from participants when they were asked what kind of training would be beneficial for Parent Centred School Partnership Council members. A few suggestions revolved around training members on what a PSPC does, and how to run their meetings properly. Some of the other suggestions were: having parents sit at meetings for at least a year before taking on the duties of a formal position; the provision of opportunities for grant writing and public speaking courses; and, receiving general information on how to get more parents involved.

Summary

This chapter addressed the findings drawn from the interview questions posed to each of the six Parent Advisory Council members that I interviewed in this study. These interviews described three informal Parent Advisory Councils (as opposed to formally constituted Advisory Councils for School Leadership) generally characterized as

depending upon the work of a small number of active parents, holding office – sometimes several offices – by acclamation rather than election.

Despite these low levels of active participation, the PACs were generally seen by the interviewees as important vehicles for linking families to their children's schools as well as a place where major parental or community concerns – should they arise – could be surfaced. Furthermore, participants collectively were able to describe examples of PAC activities, across each of Epstein's six categories of parental involvement that they saw as contributing positively to the well-being of their schools.

Respondents offered different suggestions about how parental engagement in school could be strengthened, and there was no consensus as to what the primary role of a PAC should be. However, a stronger role for PACs while seen as generally desirable was also seen as being dependent upon increased parental interest and involvement and upon the support of the school's administration.

Chapter five discusses my conclusions based on the findings of my study, recommendations for theory, practice and research, and a personal reflection for my own future practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of research that examines the roles, responsibilities and impacts that formalized Parent-centred School Partnership Councils have on their schools. To this end interviews were conducted early in 2011 with six current parent council members selected from three rural schools within a single Manitoba school division. Building on the findings presented in the previous chapter, this chapter presents a number of conclusions from this research, offers some recommendations for further research and practice, and ends with some personal reflections as a school administrator on how conducting this research has impacted on my own thinking and practice with regards to parental engagement.

Conclusions

There are five main conclusions that stemmed from my research. They are detailed below and are entitled::

- 1) Alternative Forms of Parent-centred School Partnership Councils
- 2) Parent Advisory Council Membership
- 3) Roles and Responsibilities of Parent Advisory Councils
- 4) PACs Working With School Administrators, Teachers and the School Board
- 5) Training

1. Alternative Forms of Parent-centred School Partnership Councils

Manitoba legislation does not mandate any form of PSPCs in all schools, but schools are required to establish Advisory Councils for School Leaders (ACSLs) upon parents' request. The benefit of having an ACSL over the other types of Parent Councils is that ACSLs are the only parent groups that have legislation defining and supporting their role (*School Partnerships*, 2005). Each of the schools in this study has a PSPC constituted as a Parent Advisory Council rather than an Advisory Council for School Leadership, and as such, lack this legislative framework. Instead, as is shown in Table 1 in Chapter 1, Parent Advisory Councils are expected to be governed by individual school board and school policies. Data from this study suggests that (i) few if any of the participants interviewed had any awareness of these distinctions, the possible advantages and disadvantages that might be associated with different council structures, or the processes by which an ACSL could be established, and (ii) that in two out of the three councils actual copies of the policies guiding such issues as their mandate and membership were not readily available and were not seen as guiding actual council practice. In this absence, past practice and the leadership/wishes of the school principal or the council chair took on increased importance.

2. Parent Advisory Council Membership

Parent Advisory Councils in all three schools depended heavily on the work of a small number of people. Overall, very few people attended PAC meetings at any of the three schools; one group maintained an average of only three to four participants, and the other two averaged between four and seven attendees. Participants were mainly parents with children in the respective school, along with the school principal and a

teacher representative – there was little or no participation from non-teaching staff, community members, or students (while the K-12 school PAC nominally had student representation the interviewees indicated that they rarely attended). Participants were also overwhelmingly female. This level of participation has a number of implications. First, without greater involvement, it would be unlikely that these PACs could be reconstituted to have ACSL status, because in accordance to the *Education Administration Act*, ACSLs must have at least seven members, unless the Minister exempts them because the school is considered too small. Second, with the lack of representation from a broader range of the school and community these PACs are, according to Joyce Epstein (2009), missing very important components of shared governance in education. That is, shared governance should encompass two-way communication with community members (those who don't have children attending school), non-teaching staff (counselors, educational assistants) and students (Epstein, 2009). Third, the fact that the work of these Parent Advisory Councils has been left, almost exclusively, to mothers of children in the schools should raise important questions. Why aren't fathers directly involved? Is this cause for concern?

3. Roles and Responsibilities of Parent Advisory Councils

All three of the PACs met monthly. The agendas were very similar and focused on reviewing and approving minutes, receiving the principal's report, correspondence, teacher's report, and new business. There seemed to be a significant disconnect between what was occurring at meetings and what interviewees felt should or could be occurring at meetings. According to the *School Partnerships* document (Manitoba Education, 2005), PACs are supposed to work purposefully together and communicate

in an open forum. According to my findings, the vast majority of the meetings are spent sharing informative reports rather than facilitating dialogue, and transmitting school information to the members (generally from the principal) where communication was primarily one way. This finding is consistent with a literature that states, there is generally a dissemination of one-way communication from schools to parents, that is most often used to inform them of administrative matters (Young, Levin & Wallin, 2008)

At least half of the interviewees were frustrated by the lack of discussion at the meetings. All of them at one time or another during their interviews stressed an increased need for discussion and at least one participant saw this lack of discussion as the root cause for the low numbers of attendees at PAC meetings. I too believe that there may be a link between the low number of participants and the way these meetings were conducted. As noted above, and within my findings, the majority of the PC meetings were spent disseminating information to the group rather than providing opportunity for meaningful input and decision-making opportunities. Considering each group stated that the schools already provide newsletters and emails that share information with parents, it is probably not surprising that some parents would consider the meetings a waste of their time.

According to *The Canadian Home and School Federation* (2002), the general role of all Parent Councils in Canadian education is to, “enhance the quality of school programs and improve the level of student achievement in the public schools” (p. 2). More specifically, the roles of ASCLs, as outlined in *Renewing Education* (1994) were as follows:

1. Provide recommendations to the school board with respect to the process of hiring and appointing principals
2. Participate in the development of the school plan
3. Participate in the development of the school budget
4. Participate in school reviews
5. Provide recommendations to the principal regarding school matters as they arise and as requested
6. Provide pertinent and meaningful school information to their parents and community member

All of these roles are directly linked to school governance as defined and described throughout this thesis. That is, each of these factors requires councils to work purposefully with school staff and community members to improve on the needs, issues and concerns that will make a positive difference in the lives of students (*School Partnerships, 2005*).

Two of the roles mentioned above (*Provide recommendations to the school board with respect to the process of hiring and appointing principals and Provide pertinent and meaningful school information to their parents and community members*) were evident in the remarks of participants. However, it is important to note that the first one that asks for PC input in hiring principals was mentioned only once. Only one PC member talked about her PC's role in hiring a Principal. She stated that she enjoyed the process and took great pride in being a part of it. She also stated her dismay in the fact that this happened once several years ago and hasn't happened since. Thus, one could claim that this role too is not fulfilled on an ongoing and consistent basis.

The second role mentioned with regards to providing information to parents and community members was fulfilled. I estimated that more than 80% of the total time of the three meetings I observed was spent disseminating information to PC members. This role has the least to do with shared school governance. It is important to note, much of the other 20% of the estimated time allotment was spent discussing fundraising, volunteerism, and school events. The only discussion during the PAC observations that I classified as shared school governance is some dialogue around bringing back Science Fairs. One member stated she would like to see them brought back as a school undertaking. She shared some of her feelings around the benefits of having them but the idea was not supported.

I did not find any evidence of PAC participation in key areas such as the development of school plans; participation in the school budget; participation in school reviews; or, recommendations to the principal regarding school matters. Thus, my findings coincide with Edwin's (2007) declaration that the bold vision of a true educational partnership, where parents are viewed as equals in the realm of school governance remains a far-off desire in the communities in which this study was conducted. They did however take part in other very important issues as described in Chapter Four. Most notably, the K-12 school helping rid the school of a head lice issue. This example coincides with Epstein's work as this example crosses the boundaries of the entire framework.

4. PACs Working With School Administrators, Teachers and the School Board

The findings suggest that each PAC does work with its respective principal. That is, each principal attends meetings regularly, and does give a 'Principal's Report.' There

is no evidence to suggest that these relationships are strained in any way. However, the results do suggest that parents are aware of the potential political nature of their role with the principal, and are more apt to ensure that they “keep the principal happy” rather than provide critique or potentially disagree because of their belief that the principals ultimately have the power to make the decisions. Again, this puts into question the authenticity of parental engagement as reflected in the intent of ASCL legislation.

There was very little evidence of any kind of relationship between PACs and teachers, other than with the individual teachers who attend the PAC meetings who gave a brief ‘Teachers Report’ on school events. It appears that, at best, PAC members relate to teachers through their work as volunteers or fundraisers, but there is little other work with teachers on educational programming or student needs.

Finally, my findings suggest that these PAC’s did not have strong relationships with their School Board. Only one member acknowledged working in any way with this group. These findings are reflective of the need to critically consider the extent to which educators and school boards wish to have authentically engaged PACs that may challenge them on issues of concern. Unfortunately, PAC members who are not aware or trained regarding the scope of their roles and responsibilities may be easier to “manage” politically, but are also less likely to be engaged in the meaningful ways intended by the ASCL legislation in Manitoba. Such findings beg the question of whether or not public educators prefer PAC members to be docile recipients of information rather than engaged parental contingents that may also bring with them conflicts and concerns.

5. Training

According to the participants in this study, there were few, if any, training opportunities available to Parent Advisory Council members. Five of the six interviewees stated that they received no training. The sixth stated there was a lot of training when she initially became a PAC member approximately 19 years ago. Training should be made available, particularly for those PAC members or potential PAC members who desire or would accept it. All of the interviewees suggested training methods that would be beneficial.

Based on these findings, the first question then becomes, who should be training people to work effectively on any form of Parent-centred School Partnership Council? Three obvious possibilities would be school principals, school divisions or the province (Manitoba Education). However, I also suggest that one more party should be strongly considered as potential trainers of PSPC members; that being Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC) as briefly described in Chapter Two. MAPC's mission is "to support, promote, and enhance meaningful involvement and participation of parents in order to improve the education and well-being of children in Manitoba" (http://mapc.mb.ca/PDFs/AGM/final_board_nomination2010.pdf). MAPC clearly has the mandate and the expertise to do this, and should be a strong training partner. I suggest that all four of these groups should be working together to ensure proper initial and ongoing training and support for PC members/groups.

Recommendations

This study attempted to clarify to what degree members of Parent Councils in one Manitoba school system understand their roles and responsibilities as outlined in

The Education Act, and to determine to what degree schools and Parent Councils work together on issues of school governance. As Joyce Epstein (2009) concluded, “there is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for parent involvement” (p. 1). While I do not think anyone would argue with the statement that “parents need to be involved in their child’s education”, the key questions are, to what extent and how? In this regard there continue to be conflicting views about the role parents should have in education. This section will offer some recommendations for practice and further research.

Recommendation #1: The Need for a Provincial Audit of Parent-Centred School Partnership Committees.

Like all provinces in Canada, there is much diversity throughout Manitoba. Every community is unique. Thus, so are their needs, views, and capabilities, which can all play a part in managing a school. With this in mind, it is impossible to implement a general set of parameters around what a PSPC should and shouldn’t do. However, this doesn’t mean that efforts shouldn’t be made to plan for success.

If the province is as serious about parental partnerships as the literature, policy, and legislation states, some steps need to be taken to ensure success. First, some type of audit should be done. The province has to know what duties in which Parent-centred School Partnership Councils are taking part, and what they feel they should be doing. Likewise, the audit would have to get an understanding of what principals, school divisions and teachers feel PSPCs are doing, and in what they feel is reasonable for them to take part.

Recommendation #2: The Promotion of Advisory Councils for School Leadership as the Preferred Council Structure.

Schools are required to establish Advisory Councils of School Leaders (ACSLs) upon parents' requests. ACSLs were legislated to represent and involve parents and community members in important decision-making procedures at the school and school board levels; that is, shared governance. In general, the participants that I interviewed had never heard of ACSLs or any other possible structure for a Parent-centred School Partnership Council.

Based on my findings, I would suggest that information regarding roles, responsibilities, and legislation be distributed to all PSPC members throughout the province through regular training sessions and information updates provided at the very least annually by either Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC) or Manitoba Education. The legislation pertaining to ACSLs was registered fifteen years ago. Based on my observations and interviews, most Parent Advisory Council members do not remain on their councils for long periods of time, and most of the ones I interviewed were new or fairly new in their roles. Thus, these individuals would not understand their roles or responsibilities, or the purpose behind this legislation without deliberate attention being paid to regular training and information provision. Simply put, councils have to be provided with more comprehensive information in parent friendly language.

Findings from this study suggest to me that one possible explanation for the small number of people who take an active role in the Parent Advisory Councils relates to their lack of a clear and substantial mandate in terms of roles and responsibilities.

Were they to be formally constituted as an Advisory Council on School Leadership this issue would be better addressed.

Recommendation #3: Shared Governance - Building a Stronger Voice for Parents

My findings suggest that there is very little shared governance where parents are partners in the decision making process. As stated above, the Parent Councils I observed were mostly focused on disseminating information in one-way communication modes. All of the PCs that I studied had newsletters going out to parents, and could use e-mails to distribute information if they wanted. More information during meetings should be spent discussing important issues in the realm of shared governance.

As stated in the *Education Administration Act* (9(7)), a teacher representative and the administrator are ex officio non-voting members of the advisory council. My research suggested the opposite. That is, that the administrator had the most power in the decision making process, and in some cases had the only “vote;” at the very least, they were acknowledged as having great power over the overall functioning of the PAC. Administrators, if they really want to make shared governance work, have to be willing to share more opportunities for governance with members of the PAC’s and to grant them more opportunities to be involved in decision-making and educational dialogue in more meaningful ways as advocated by Epstein.

Recommendation #4: Getting Fathers Involved

As the literature suggests, and in accordance to my findings, members of PCSC’s are mostly mothers of children attending schools. Work should be done to get more fathers involved in PCSC’s. There are two main benefits that may arise with fathers being involved. First, the male population may bring about a unique perspective

to the group, which could help solve problems and help with educational reform.

Second, the inherent modeling that would exist would pass on the message to children that have male role models that 'education is important' and should be taken seriously.

Areas for Further Research

Because there is so little research done in this area, this study only "scratched the surface" of parent councils and their role within the realm of school governance in Manitoba. There are many different interesting studies that could spin off this thesis. Following are some suggested studies.

It would be interesting to see how many schools in Manitoba have Advisory Council of School Leaders as their Parent-centred School Partnership Council designate. Taking this a step farther, it would be noteworthy to report how many PSPCs with the ACSL designate know of their designate and understand their roles and responsibilities as such. This data could be compared to the PSPCs of a decade or so ago to determine whether this "push" in legislation had its desired effect or whether its political aim lost momentum and importance over the years. Given the political rhetoric and literature that exists around the importance of parental engagement in schooling the findings are a sad testimony to how rhetoric and reality can be worlds apart.

Throughout my observations and interviews, I found that the administrators of each school hold much power over the direction, input and organization of their PACs. It seemed that members felt that very little could be done without the principal's approval and that often members were leery of causing potential conflict. This left me wondering how much principals know about Advisory Councils of School Leaders, their own roles within them, and their comfort levels with authentic and meaningful parental involvement

and shared governance. Thus, research could be done around how well principals understand their roles and responsibilities within the context of shared governance in partnership with parent groups, their comfort levels with critique and/or fostering educational dialogue with parents, and their perceptions of the extent to which PAC members can/must or should engage in such dialogue.

To take this a step farther, and perhaps adding to potential controversy, it would be interesting to find out the principals' views on what they believe their roles should be and what the PACs role should be in educational governance. Do principals long for shared governance? Do they feel that parents have the training, experience and knowledge base to make pedagogically and educationally sound decisions? To what extent are principals happy with the work their PACs are doing (primarily in fundraising), and what are the areas in which principals believe parents should/could have more voice versus areas in which they feel parents should have less voice (and why)? At this point in time, it is apparent that most parents are unaware of their roles, legislative and potentially otherwise. For example, it may be that it is because parents tend to be unaware of their roles that principals are unsure of the extent to which parents should be engaged in issues of governance.

It would be very interesting to complete further research of gender and PSPC participation. It would be interesting to research lack of male participation from a male parent/guardian perspective. Why, as research and this study suggests, aren't they directly involved in PSPCs? And, it would be interesting to see if more males showed up if there were any major issues such as a school closure; or more stereotypically if a high school refused to offer sports if there was a strong history/culture of athletics.

Another key question that could be studied, albeit maybe more difficult to administer is, *do different forms of parent involvement have a direct link to student achievement?* That is, can strong PSPCs have direct influence in improving student achievement, and conversely, do weak PSPCs mean that students may be missing out on opportunities that maximize student learning potential and/or success?

A comparison could be made between rural and urban PSPCs. It would be interesting to see if rural school divisions and urban school divisions have the same issues, have similar PSPC designations, or carry on the same tasks.

A Personal Reflection

As a school Administrator who spent the last several years engulfed in the subject of shared governance through Parent Centered School Partnership Councils, I have learned a lot. Shared governance at the school level can work. It is obvious that all of the people who were involved in this study care passionately for the students and for the schools with which they were involved with. The interviewees wanted to be heard; and offered a lot of good information they absorbed from years of experience living in the community, and in some cases being directly involved in the school. However, there was some frustration evident – some felt as though their voice was not validated.

Being a new Principal, I ‘inherited’ a Parent Advisory Council that has dissolved over the past couple of years, and no formal body presently exists. I have, however, spent time seeking advice from parents and community members and inviting them to our first PCSC meeting. Through personal dialogue I have already had a lot of ‘advice’ sent my

way. Those I have talked to, including former PAC members, have strong opinions and advice; most of what seems very reasonable.

After forming a 'new' parent council, I will find out what council members feel their duties should include. I would like to introduce Epstein's framework to initiate conversation, and find out how the council wants to proceed. Moreover, I would like to use the Province's booklets *Parent Partnerships* and *Renewing Education*, because there is some great information on how to plan and implement PSPC; and what their purpose and duties should be. Through this research, I have made strong ties with a representative at MAPC. I would work with her and seek her direction to help increase the likelihood of growing a strong PSPC at my school.

In short, I do want to work closely with parents and have a strong PSPC. I truly believe that parents and educators should be working together; and parents' views are often overlooked. Parents frequently offer great insight and can help ground educational practices to 'real life' requirements. Who knows children better than their own parents? Likewise, teachers are trained to focus on research-based practice, pedagogy and learning. It makes sense that parental input and teacher training should be combined to best benefit children.

Conclusion

A central feature of Canadian public education – part of what makes public schools 'public' – is that our schools are controlled by/accountable to the public. This public accountability exists at the provincial level through the Minister of Education and the Provincial Legislature, and at the school division level through the election of local School Boards. Canadian public school systems have not followed the lead of some

other jurisdictions to replicate this level of accountability at the level of the individual school through various governance models of site-based management. However, Manitoba, like all other provinces has since the 1990s sought to increase community and parental input into local school decision-making – specifically, in Manitoba, through legislation related to the establishment of Advisory Councils on School Leadership. As their title and mandate clearly indicates, these are advisory to the school principal and are expected to serve as an important vehicle for two-way communication between schools, families and communities. This study suggests, that, at least in the specific rural schools that formed the focus of this research, the image of school-community partnership that underlies the ideal of ACSLs and which has considerable support in research (albeit not extensively Canadian or rural research) has yet to be realized.

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Appendix A

Rights and Responsibilities of Parents
http://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/p250_2e.php
C.C.S.M. c. P250
The Public Schools Act

Rights of parents

58.6 Subject to the provisions of this Act and the regulations, a person who is resident in Manitoba is entitled to enroll his or her child in a program in any school in Manitoba and to

- (a) be informed regularly of the attendance, behaviour and academic achievement of his or her child in school;
- (b) consult with his or her child's teacher or other employee of the school division or school district about the child's program and academic achievement;
- (c) have access to his or her child's pupil file;
- (d) receive information about programs available to his or her child;
- (e) be informed of the discipline and behaviour management policies of the school or school division or school district, and to be consulted before the policies are established or revised;
- (f) be a member of an advisory council, local school committee or school committee at his or her child's school; and
- (g) accompany his or her child and assist him or her to make representations to the school board before a decision is made to expel the child.

S.M. 1996, c. 51, s. 10.

Responsibilities of parents

58.7 A parent of a child of compulsory school age or who is attending school shall

- (a) cooperate fully with the child's teachers and other employees of the school division or school district to ensure the child complies with
 - (i) school and school division or school district student discipline and behaviour management policies, and
 - (ii) the school's code of conduct; and
- (b) take all reasonable measures to ensure the child attends school regularly.

Appendix B

MAPC Proposed Resolution

MAPC Proposed Resolution

April 23, 2010

Equal Status for All Formally Recognized Parent Advisory Councils in Manitoba

Background

In 1996, Manitoba Education and Training established the Advisory Councils for School Leadership regulation as a means of formally recognizing the role of parents in a governance related group within school communities. Formal guidelines were laid out to ensure that the operation of - and inclusion of - parent groups operating in a school community would be formally recognized and respected as an essential part of the learning system. Groups operating under these guidelines would be recognized within the province as an Advisory Council for School Leadership. This legislation allows for growth in its partnership strengths and standings within its school community, allowing for greater participation and involvement.

Introduction Statement

Many parent groups throughout the province continue to struggle with building and maintaining sound governance groups within their school communities. The challenges may range from geographic to low numbers of actively involved parents. Each group must ensure its continuity by developing best practices within their respective school communities. These practices may meet the guiding principles outlined within the ACSL regulation, even though the group itself may not be recognized as an ACSL.

Action Requests

That Manitoba Association of Parent Councils request of the Minister of Education to revisit the 1996 ACSL legislation to recognize and support the importance and authority of all recognized Parent Advisory Councils in the province to provide a level and consistent playing field for all forms of parental involvement in Manitoba's public school system.

Submitted by Manitoba Association of Parent Councils Board of Directors for consideration at the 2010 Annual General Meeting.

Appendix C

Ethics Approval Certificate



CTC Building
208 - 194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
Fax (204) 269-7173
www.umanitoba.ca/research

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

May 3, 2010

TO: **Lonnie Liske** Advisor - Dawn C. Wallin
Principal Investigator

FROM: **Lorna Guse, Chair** 
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: **Protocol #E2010:037**
"Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba "

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

- if you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to Eveline Saurette in the Office of Research Services, (e-mail eveline_saurette@umanitoba.ca, or fax 261-0325), including the Sponsor name, before your account can be opened.
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at: http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.

Appendix D – Consent Forms

Letter of Consent for Superintendent of School Division

Research Project Title: Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba

Researcher: Lonnie Liske

Sponsoring Institution: University of Manitoba

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Dawn Wallin, <wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca>

Date: June 16th, 2010

Dear Mr. _____:

I am a Masters student working on my thesis entitled, **Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba**. As you know, Parent Advisory Councils within your School Division work with their respective schools to improve student learning. I am writing to request your permission to involve three Parent Councils within your school division in my study.

The purpose of the study is to examine the extent to which Parent Advisory Councils understand their roles and responsibilities; in what ways they work with schools in the decision making process; the factors that affect the partnership; and how they could be structured to encourage parental participation in the decision making process. To that end, I wish to observe three Parent Advisory Councils and interview at least six parent members (two from each council) once your permission has been granted. Below is a Research Project Consent Form that provides the information for participants about the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection, and the strategies used to ensure confidentiality.

Your signature on the Superintendent's Consent Form will authorize your approval for these Parent Advisory Council members to participate in the study. If at any time the purpose of this study changes, you will be notified before alteration takes place. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Dear Study Participant:

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is all about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take time to read this carefully and understand any accompanying information.

Procedures Involving Participants: I (Lonnie Liske) will work with three Parent Advisory Councils. In each case, I will observe one Parent Advisory Council meeting, where I will take notes describing the content of the meetings, the interactions between members of the council, and my general impressions on how the Parent Advisory Council functions. Afterwards, I will make arrangements, and obtain individual signed consent, for two volunteers to be interviewed for about half an hour, but no longer than one hour, at their convenience. I purposefully chose a diverse sample of schools in order to get a broad scope of information. That is, the schools all have different compositions so that all grades (K-12) are represented.

During the interview, I will ask open-ended questions to gain insight and perspective regarding the roles and responsibilities of the parent council; the ways in which members work together with the school; and how Parent Advisory Councils and schools could work together to support the participation of parents in school governance. Interviewees will be provided the interview questions prior to the interview either through email or regular mail so that they may think through the questions before we meet.

Risks and Benefits: I do not foresee any risks to participants in this study. Participants and parent councils in general may benefit, however, from the insight and knowledge they obtain from the study as it may affect the work they do within their own Parent Advisory Council.

Recording of Interviews and Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality of the participants. Neither the School Division, nor the particular Parent Advisory Councils of this study will be identified, and at most, individuals would be referred to only by their role in the council (i.e. chair, president, secretary, etcetera). The observation field notes will not be shared with anyone, and when analyzed, care will be taken to ensure only generalized information is presented and that all identifying information is stripped from the analysis. Similarly, the analysis and reporting of interview information will remain anonymous. No name of individuals or advisory groups will be recorded, though the titles of those within the groups may be represented (president, chair, etc). Tape recordings and field notes will be kept locked securely in a file cabinet in my home at all times and not shared with anyone, except potentially my Thesis Advisor should clarification or analysis of content be necessary. All data will be destroyed once the thesis is complete, anticipated to be January, 2011.

Feedback about the study: After the interview, participants will be provided with their transcript so that they can verify, add, delete or change the content of their remarks. When this research project is over, individual participants and the Parent Advisory Council will be able to access the completed thesis at the University of Manitoba library, or they can sign on the consent form with contact information to receive a summary of the study results. The final research information may be used for presentation and publication purposes.

Your signature indicates that you understand to your satisfaction the information regarding participation. In no way does this letter or your signature waive your legal

rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. It is important to note, participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions without prejudice or consequence. All participation should be as informed as the initial consent, so participants should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout the study. In doing so, the contact information is:

Mr. Lonnie Liske
Box 51, Beausejour, MB R0E 0C0
Phone: 204.268.1089 E-mail: lliske@sunrisesd.ca

OR

Dr. Dawn Wallin
Room 207, Faculty of Education, The University of Manitoba
Phone: 204.474.6069 E-mail: wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca

This research has been approved by the Education and Nursing Research and Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact Professor Dawn Wallin or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204.474.7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.
Sincerely,

Mr. Lonnie Liske

MASTER'S THESIS RESEARCH PROJECT
SUPERINTENDANTS CONSENT FORM

Research Project Title: Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba

Dear Mr. Liske :

I hereby give permission for the research study: *Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba* to be conducted in _____ School Division during the months of September 2010 to April 2011. I understand that you will be observing three Parent Advisory Council meetings and be interviewing two members of each as a means for data collection; and that a copy of the data analysis and summary will be distributed to participants once the study is complete. I understand that my signature below indicates that I have understood to my satisfaction the information regarding participation. In no way does this letter or their signature waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. I am free to withdraw my consent from the study at any time, and I am free to ask for clarification or new information throughout the study.

X _____

Superintendent's Signature

x _____

Date

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study. To that end, my contact email for receipt of an electronic copy is included below.

Email Address

Letter of Consent for Principals of Participating Schools

Research Project Title: **Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba**

Researcher: **Lonnie Liske**

Sponsoring Institution: **University of Manitoba**

Thesis Advisor: **Dr. Dawn Wallin, wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca**

Date: **June 21, 2010**

Dear Mr(s):

I am a Masters student working on my thesis entitled, **Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba**. I have been granted consent from the Superintendent to research Parent Advisory Councils in the school division. I want to inform you that the school council representing your school will be provided the opportunity to participate in the study. Below is a Research Project Consent Form that provides the information for participants about the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection, and the strategies used to ensure confidentiality.

Your signature on this consent form will authorize your approval for me to seek Parent Advisory Council members to participate in the study. It is important to note, that each participant will be asked to give written consent to participate in the study, to which they can decline or withdraw from the study at any time. Please contact me at any time if you have any general questions or require clarification. If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this study, please sign the request for your email at the end of this document and I will be happy to send you a copy.

Dear Study Participant:

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is all about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take time to read this carefully and understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the Research: This study examines the formal roles of Parent Advisory Councils. More specifically, I am studying the extent to which Parent Advisory Councils understand their roles and responsibilities; the ways they work with schools in the decision making process; the factors that affect the partnership, and how they could be

structured to encourage parental participation in the decision making process. If at any time the purpose of this study changes, you will be notified before alteration takes place.

Procedures Involving Participants: I (Lonnie Liske) will work with three Parent Advisory Councils. In each case, I will observe one Parent Advisory Council meeting, where I will take notes describing the content of the meetings, the interactions between members of the council, and my general impressions on how the Parent Advisory Council functions. Afterwards, I will make arrangements, and obtain individual signed consent, for two volunteers to be interviewed for about half an hour, but no longer than one hour, at their convenience.

During the interview, I will ask open-ended questions to gain insight and perspective regarding the roles and responsibilities of the parent council; the ways in which members work together with the school; and how Parent Advisory Councils and schools could work together to support the participation of parents in school governance. Interviewees will be provided the interview questions prior to the interview either through email or regular mail so that they may think through the questions before we meet.

Risks and Benefits: I do not foresee any risks to participants in this study. Participants and parent councils in general may benefit, however, from the insight and knowledge they obtain from the study as it may affect the work they do within their own Parent Advisory Council.

Recording of Interviews and Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality of the participants. Neither the School Division, nor the particular Parent Advisory Councils of this study will be identified, and at most, individuals would be referred to only by their role in the council (i.e. chair, president, secretary, etcetera). The observation field notes will not be shared with anyone, and when analyzed, care will be taken to ensure only generalized information is presented and that all identifying information is stripped from the analysis. Similarly, the analysis and reporting of interview information will remain anonymous. No name of individuals or advisory groups will be recorded, though the titles of those within the groups may be represented (president, chair, etc). Tape recordings and field notes will be kept locked securely in a file cabinet in my home at all times and not shared with anyone, except potentially my Thesis Advisor should clarification on analysis of content be necessary. All data will be destroyed once the thesis is complete, anticipated to be December, 2010.

Feedback about the study: After the interview, participants will be provided with their transcript so that they can verify, add, delete or change the content of their remarks. When this research project is over, individual participants and the Parent Advisory Council will be able to access the completed thesis at the University of Manitoba library, or they can sign on the consent form with contact information to receive a summary of the study results. The final research information may be used for presentation and publication purposes.

Participants' signature below indicates that they have understood to their satisfaction the information regarding participation. In no way does this letter or their signature waive their legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. They are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions without prejudice or consequence. Their continued participation should be as informed as their initial consent, so they should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout the study. In doing so, please contact me:

Mr. Lonnie Liske
Box 51, Beausejour, MB R0E 0C0
Phone: 204.268.1089 E-mail: lliske@sunrisesd.ca

OR

Dr. Dawn Wallin
Room 207, Faculty of Education, The University of Manitoba
Phone: 204.474.6069 E-mail: wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca

This research has been approved by the Education and Nursing Research and Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact Professor Dawn Wallin or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 204.474.7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.
Sincerely,

Mr. Lonnie Liske

X _____
Principal's Signature

X _____
Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study. To that end, my contact email for receipt of an electronic copy is included below.

Email Address

Letter of Consent for Participating Parent Advisory Council Members

Research Project Title: **Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba**

Researcher: **Lonnie Liske**

Sponsoring Institution: **University of Manitoba**

Thesis Advisor: **Dr. Dawn Wallin, wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca**

Dear Participant,

I am a Masters student working on my thesis entitled, **Parent Advisory Councils as a Formalized Mechanism for Encouraging Parental Involvement in Manitoba**. As you know, Parent Advisory Councils within your School Division work with their respective schools to improve student learning. I am writing to request your permission as a Parent Advisory Council member to be observed for my study. I have been granted consent from the Superintendent to research Parent Advisory Councils in the school division. I have also been authorized by the principal of your school to proceed with this study. Below is a Research Project Consent Form that provides the information for participants about the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection, and the strategies used to ensure confidentiality.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is all about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take time to read this carefully and understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the Research: This study examines the formal roles of Parent Advisory Councils. More specifically, I am studying the extent to which Parent Advisory Councils understand their roles and responsibilities; the ways they work with schools in the decision making process; the factors that affect the partnership, and how they could be structured to encourage parental participation in the decision making process. If at any time the purpose of this study changes, you will be notified before alteration takes place.

Procedures Involving Participants: I (Lonnie Liske) am working with three Parent Advisory Councils over the course of my study. In each case, I will observe one Parent Advisory Council meeting, where I will take notes describing the content of the meetings, the interactions between members of the council, and my general impressions on how the Parent Advisory Council functions. I am also going to make arrangements, and obtain individual signed consent, for two volunteers to be interviewed for about half an hour, but no longer than one hour, at their convenience. I purposefully chose a diverse sample of schools in order to get a broad scope of

information. That is, the schools all have different compositions so that all grades (K-12) are represented. This consent form requests your permission to be observed.

During the interviews, I will ask open-ended questions to gain insight and perspective regarding the roles and responsibilities of your parent council; the ways in which you work together with your school; and how Parent Advisory Councils and schools could work together to support the participation of parents in school governance. If you agree to participate, you will be provided the interview questions prior to the interview either through email or regular mail so that you may think through the questions before we meet.

Risks and Benefits: I do not foresee any risks should you participate in this study. Participants and parent councils in general may benefit, however, from the insight and knowledge they obtain from the study as it may affect the work they do within their own Parent Advisory Council.

Recording of Interviews and Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to maintain confidentiality of the participants. Neither the School Division, nor the particular Parent Advisory Councils of this study will be identified, and at most, individuals would be referred to only by their role in the council (i.e. chair, president, secretary, etcetera). The observation field notes will not be shared with anyone, and when analyzed, care will be taken to ensure only generalized information is presented and that all identifying information is stripped from the analysis. Similarly, the analysis and reporting of interview information will remain anonymous. No name of individuals or advisory groups will be recorded, though the titles of those within the groups may be represented (president, chair, etc). Tape recordings and field notes will be kept locked securely in a file cabinet in my home at all times and not shared with anyone, except potentially my Thesis Advisor should clarification on analysis of content be necessary. All data will be destroyed once the thesis is complete, anticipated to be May, 2011.

Feedback about the study: If you participate in the interview, you will be provided with your transcript so that you can verify, add, delete or change the content of your remarks. When this research project is over, you and your Parent Advisory Council will be able to access the completed thesis at the University of Manitoba library, or you can sign on the consent form with contact information to receive a summary of the study results. The final research information may be used for presentation and publication purposes.

Your signature below indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation. In no way does this letter or your signature waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout the study. If at any time you would like to withdraw from the study, or if you would like

to obtain further information or clarification, please feel free to contact me or my Thesis Advisor:

Mr. Lonnie Liske
Box 51, Beausejour, MB R0E 0C0
Phone: 204.268.1089 E-mail: lliske@sunrisesd.ca

OR

Dr. Dawn Wallin
Room 207, Faculty of Education, The University of Manitoba
Phone: 204.474.6069 E-mail: wallind@ms.umanitoba.ca

This research has been approved by the Education and Nursing Research and Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact Professor Dawn Wallin or the Human Ethics Secretariat (204.474.7122, or margaret_bowman@umanitoba.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for you records and reference. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mr. Lonnie Liske

I consent to be observed during a Parent Advisory Council meeting for the purposes of Mr. Lonnie Liske's research on the roles of Parent Advisory Councils.

X _____ X _____
Participant's Signature Date

Researcher's Signature Date

I would consider being interviewed at a mutually agreed upon time and date to further help in this study.

- Yes**
- No**

(Please initial)

If yes, please include contact information:

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study. To that end, my contact email for receipt of an electronic copy is included below.

Email Address