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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Pioneering Participatory Governance:

Networks of School Councils in Two Alberta School Jurisdictions

by

Shirley Lynn Odynski 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

in

Educational Administration and Leadership

Department of Educational Policy Studies

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

Spring, 2000

University of Alberta

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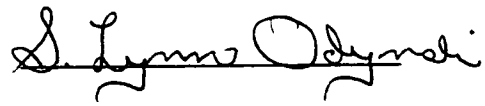
Degree: Master of Education

Year this Degree Granted: 2000



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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Pioneering Participatory Governance: Networks of School Councils in Two Alberta School Jurisdictions* submitted by *Shirley Lynn Odynski* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Administration and Leadership.

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ABSTRACT

This interpretive study examined in what ways networks of school councils in two Alberta jurisdiction enabled meaningful involvement from the perspectives of seven parents, two trustees, and three administrators. Involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful was authentic and enabled the network participants to have an informed understanding of the public education system; to participate in deliberations about philosophies, policies, programs, plans, priorities, and budgets; to act in ways that enriched the public education system; to effectively fulfill their roles and responsibilities as school council members and trustees; and to discuss educational matters openly and honestly at the network meetings. Networks of school councils which provided genuine opportunities for meaningful involvement required a conception of public education as a shared responsibility and enabled participatory governance of the public education system. A major theme that emerged from this study was that meaningful involvement is a fragile and tenuous ideal.

"For we are, actually, pioneers trying to find a new path through the maze of tradition, convention, and dogma."

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those courageous individuals

who are striving to create spaces for more authentic democratic

participation in the public education system.

Without you this work would not have been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am overwhelmed by the assistance and support I have received from so many people in the completion of this thesis. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to those who are pioneering new approaches to democratic participation in the public education system who graciously provided me with the opportunity to better understand their work. I am well aware that there is some personal risk in initiating such reforms and I am honored that they would place their trust in me.

A debt of gratitude is also owed to all of those who have inspired and encouraged me to pursue this subject matter. In particular I would like to thank the executive committee of Edmonton School Councils for planting the seeds of school councils as vehicles for partnership and collaboration and to the members of the Parents as Partners Committee who nourished those seeds and helped me to realize that such a vision was well within the realm of possibility.

As well, I owe a debt of gratitude to all of the teachers and principals in my children's schools who have encouraged and supported my participation over the years. Both my children's and my own education have been enriched by that participation.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and confidence of my advisor, Dr. Margaret Haughey, who had the uncanny talent of knowing exactly when I really needed to speak with her and whose thoughtful guidance and encouragement supported me throughout the writing of this thesis.

In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Gerald Taylor for his thoughtful guidance and assistance over the course of the last four years and for persevering through the course on parent-teacher partnerships even though he had to contend with the somewhat contested deliberations of his two students as they worked out an understanding of partnership that they could both agree to.

As well I would like to thank Dr. Bob Jackson for his initial encouragement to pursue my studies in this particular subject area and for his sense of humor that was always at the ready to motivate and inspire!

Finally, I would like to thank my family-Ron, Kirsten, Kelsey and Veronica-and my Mom and Dad for their support, encouragement, assistance, and patience as I have endeavored to complete my studies. It is not easy for a family who has grown to count on a full-time mother to suddenly have no-one to fill that role. Thank you for stepping-in, taking over and being there when I needed you most! And thank you Marion, Vilma and Yvette for helping us all to survive!

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CHAPTER 1: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHOD

On May 31, 1995 the School Amendment Act (Bill 37) was passed, with the intent of initiating a major restructuring of the education system in the province of Alberta. With the passing of this bill, Section 17 of the School Act, which pertains to school councils, was substantively amended for the third time in less than a decade. As it now stands the School Councils Handbook advises that "Section 17 of the School Act recognizes and reaffirms the right of parents and the school community to have meaningful involvement in the education of their children through school councils" (Alberta Education, 1999, p.1). However, the nature of involvement that is considered to be meaningful is not spelled out in the handbook or in the Act. The legislation simply requires that school councils be established for every school operated by a board and enables–but does not require–schools councils to advise the principal and the school board regarding any matter relating to the school. The question of how to do this in a meaningful way is left up to those who serve on school councils to decide.

The central problem, which underlies this study, is that the meaning of "meaningful involvement" is not clear. Each person who serves on a school council, indeed, each person in a school community, may have a different understanding of what it means to be meaningfully involved in the education of children through school councils. Furthermore, it may well be, that for the various members of a school community meaningful involvement has no shared meaning. Moreover, the implementation of school councils that enable meaningful involvement may not be possible unless the various members of a school community develop a shared understanding about the nature of involvement that is perceived and experienced as meaningful.

The paradox, then, is that while school councils are intended to provide parents and members of the school community an opportunity for meaningful involvement in the public education system, without a mutual understanding of what it means to be meaningfully involved, those who serve on school councils may feel that their involvement is inappropriate, insufficient, or overwhelming. The purpose of this study

was to shed some light on the nature of involvement that is perceived and experienced as meaningful by those who participate in networks of school councils.

Background to the Study

Under Section 17 of the 1988 School Act, parents of students who attended public schools were first given the right to establish school advisory councils. However, these school advisory councils were powerless entities unless a school board delegated duties to them. While the intended outcome of this legislation was to provide school boards the opportunity to enable the effective functioning of these councils, in practice, no school board chose to do so (Alberta Education, 1994, p.9). As a result, Section 17 of the 1988 School Act failed to substantially alter the involvement of parents and other members of the school community in the public education system.

With the introduction of the School Amendment Act in May, 1994 amendments were made to Section 17 of the School Act which were intended to strengthen parental and community involvement in the public education system through participation on school councils. These amendments made school councils mandatory, gave school councils decision making powers with respect to both the educational standards and fiscal management of the school and were to be comprised of a majority of parents. However, following an extensive public consultation process, it was concluded that school councils should not be given decision making authority. As a result these amendments were withdrawn before they became law and Section 17 was substantially revised once again. This time, while they continued to be mandatory, school councils were limited to an advisory role and the roles and responsibilities of the council members were to be determined at the discretion of the school council within the constraints of the School Council Regulation and upon the delegation of duties or functions by the board of trustees. This legislation was passed on May 31, 1995 (see Appendix A).

With the passing of this legislation, three significant changes were made with respect to school councils as they had existed under the 1988 School Act. First, school principals were required to conduct a school council establishment meeting on an annual basis until a school council had been established for the school. Second, school councils

were given the right to advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school. Third, the membership of the school council was no longer limited to parents. Instead, the majority of the members were required to be parents, but in addition, the principal, at least one teacher, at least one community member, and in high schools at least one student, were also required to be members. The effect of this legislation, then, was to formalize the role that school councils could play in providing advice to both the principal of the school and the board of trustees. What was optional under the 1988 Act became required practice under the 1995 amendments (O'Reilly, 1995).

However, the lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of school councils, combined with the confusion that arose when the 1994 amendments were withdrawn and further revised, has led to much uncertainty about the role of school councils. According to Peters (1997), "Other than putting legislation in place facilitating their establishment, provincial governments have done nothing to clarify the many uncertainties surrounding school councils" (p.18). In addition, the current Alberta model differs from school councils being put in place in other provinces and countries. As a result, there is little practical experience amongst principals, teachers, students, parents, and members of the community at large, to inform their implementation.

To add to the confusion, school councils in Alberta now have the opportunity to provide advice, not only to the school principal, but also to the school board. But, before school councils can fulfill this part of their mandate they need a mechanism by which to advise the board. However, the current legislation is silent on this issue. While the need for such a mechanism is not addressed in the Act, Alberta Education (1999) does advise that, "Once established, school councils should be able to look beyond the needs of a particular school and cooperate with other school councils in sharing information and ideas and in providing advice and information to school boards and Alberta Education (p.14)." Networks of school councils may serve as a mechanism to enable school councils to share information with each other and to provide advice to school boards.

Arriving at the Question

For me, this question has been evolving over the past twenty-five years and has its roots in my work as a school nurse in the mid 1970s. It was at this time that I first became aware of the very different sets of assumptions that often underlie schools' and families' understandings about children's schooling. As a school nurse I often made home visits to the families whose children had been referred to me for various health, learning, or social concerns. As the messenger for the school I quickly learned that families did not always view the school or the school's concerns in a very positive light, and as the messenger for the family, I often learned that the school did not always view the family or the family's response to their concerns in a very positive light!

This experience helped me to appreciate the importance of the relationship between the home and the school in influencing children's progress in school. As a result, when my own children started school, I became actively involved in their schools, in the hope, that by doing so I could better understand how to support my children and help them to be successful in school. For the past thirteen years I have served, in a variety of capacities, on a number of parent advisory councils, school councils, and regional and provincial education committees. As well I have coordinated and led in-service work shops for school councils through a joint project of The Alberta Teachers' Association and The Alberta Home and School Councils' Association and for The Edmonton Regional Professional Development Consortium. In doing so, I have worked with a number of different principals, teachers, parents, and trustees and have learned that the role that parents could or should play in their children's education and in public schools, is variously understood by both the parents and the professionals.

Two important personal experiences crystallized for me how disparate the views could be about parental participation and community involvement in the public education system. The first occurred when I chaired an organization of school councils that wanted to make a presentation to our local school board about the work our organization was doing to increase parental involvement in the education system. We were advised that we were not allowed to make a presentation at a public school board meeting because we did not want to ask the school board for anything. I was stunned to learn that this board felt it

could deny members of the public the right to speak at a public school board meeting for any reason, let alone because they wanted to share information with the trustees rather than ask the trustees to provide a service for them!

The second was as a participant in Alberta Education's Roles and Responsibilities Round Tables in 1993, where I was, once again, confronted with the realization that the notion of meaningful parental involvement in education was, at best, a contested concept. One participant, a trustee, clearly stated that it was a waste of time trying to involve parents in the education system because, on the whole, parents were apathetic and simply not interested in being involved. Another participant, a parent, expressed quite a different point of view. Her point was that parents did not want to run the schools–but they did want to have more meaningful involvement in their children's education. Unfortunately, she did not expand on what she meant by this.

I was quite puzzled by these comments, in part, because they contradicted a fundamental belief I was taught as a nursing student: The needs of a child–be they physical, cognitive, emotional, social or spiritual–could not be met in isolation from their family. That is to say, the family played an integral role in the child's life, would influence the outcome of any nursing intervention, be it health promotion or the treatment of illness, and must be considered when planning the nursing care. Yet this fundamental nursing principle did not seem to apply in the education arena. Why, I wondered, did this trustee not believe that he had a role to play in helping parents to understand the critical importance of their involvement in their children's education ? What did this parent mean when she said she wanted to be more meaningfully involved?

In an attempt to bring some clarity to these questions, in part, because my youngest child was just starting school, I decided to return to university so that I might better understand the issues underlying parental involvement in education. This quest for personal understanding has culminated with this research project.

Purpose of the Study

Networks of school councils are now beginning to form in some Alberta school jurisdictions. Through participation in the Roles and Responsibilities Round Tables and subsequent work that I did in coordinating and delivering school council workshops, I became aware of two such networks operating in two different Alberta school jurisdictions. The purpose of these networks was to create a mechanism for school council representatives to meet with each other and with representatives from central administration and the board of trustees.

My purpose in studying these networks of school councils was to understand the perceptions and experiences of those who participated in them. I was interested in learning if participation in these networks of school councils enabled involvement that was perceived and experienced as meaningful and, if so, the nature of that involvement. In doing so, I hoped to develop a better understanding of the nature of involvement that is experienced or perceived as meaningful by those who participate in networks of school councils.

Statement of the Research Problem

The central questions that guided this study were: Does participation in a network of school councils enable meaningful involvement in the public education system? And, if so, in what ways? A number of more specific questions served as guides to the study and to the analysis of the data. These questions are as follows:

1. What led to the development of these networks of school councils?
2. What were the goals of these networks of school councils?
3. How were these networks of school councils implemented?
4. What sustained their implementation?
5. What were the benefits of these networks of school councils?
6. What was the nature of involvement experienced or perceived as meaningful?

Explanation of Terminology

For the purposes of this study the following definitions were used:

School Council: "School councils are collective associations of parents, teachers, principals, staff, students, and community representatives who seek to work together to promote the well-being and effectiveness of the entire school community and thereby to enhance student learning. A school council is a means to facilitate cooperation among all the concerned participants in the local school" (Alberta Education, 1999, p.1).

Network of School Councils: Organizations of several school councils which are operated by school councils. This term does not refer to any organization or structure which is defined within the School Act. It is a loosely defined association comprised of, but not limited to, the school council chairs, or their designates, who meet on a regular basis with each other. The role, the membership, the purpose, and the manner of conducting the meetings may or may not be enabled by school board policy. Terms such as "family council," "ward council," or "council of school councils" can be used interchangeably for the term "network of school councils."

Network Participants: Those individuals who participate in the activities of the network of school councils. The participants usually include the school council chairs or their representatives who are usually parents, and other members of the school council such as the school principal, teachers, other parent representatives, or the community representative. In addition school trustees, the school superintendent or designate(s) and other members of the broader school community (for example, the ATA) may also have representatives who participate in the network of school councils.

School Council Umbrella Groups: Organizations of school councils which existed prior to the establishment of the networks of school councils and which were operated by the board of trustees and central administration.

School Community: A school's students, their parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and interested community members.

Participation and Involvement: These terms were used synonymously throughout the study.

Meaningful Involvement: Participation in the public education system, by parents and other members of the school community, that is perceived and experienced as worthwhile or beneficial by the participants.

Significance of the Problem

This study has both practical and theoretical significance. In addressing these questions, the contribution to practice is two-fold. First, this study offers an increased understanding of the nature of involvement that is perceived and experienced as meaningful. Second this study offers an increased understanding of the role that networks of school councils can play in the public education system and the necessary conditions to enable their effective functioning. Such information should be of particular interest to those who wish to establish a mechanism for school councils to provide advice to the board of trustees, to share information with other school councils, to act collectively, or to enhance the effectiveness of school councils in enabling meaningful involvement of parents and other members of the school community in the public education system.

The contribution to theory that this study offers is an increased understanding of the relationship between networks of school councils and participatory governance of the public education system. This should be of interest to those who seek to implement education reforms that promote democratic ends.

Methodology

Networks of school councils are new developments in this province and very little is known about them. This interpretive study was designed to examine in what ways participation in a network of school councils enabled "meaningful involvement" of parents and other members of the school community–from the perspectives of the individuals who participated in them. In doing so I hoped to gain a better understanding of the nature of involvement that was perceived and experienced as meaningful.

Research Design

The central assumptions that underlie the design of this study stem from my belief that meaningful involvement can not be objectively defined, quantified or measured. That is to say there is no predetermined, decisive, or conclusive definition of meaningful involvement. Rather, meaningful involvement is a socially constructed concept and as such does not have an objective reality. The variables that enable the social construction of meaningful involvement are complex, interwoven, difficult to measure and reflect the lived reality of all those who participate in the public education system.

Accordingly, I chose to use an interpretive, naturalistic approach for this qualitative study. I believed that the nature of meaningful involvement could best be understood by interpreting the multiple understandings of involvement that were experienced or perceived as meaningful by those who participated in these networks of school councils. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) point out "people tend to adhere to the methodology that is most consonant with their socialized world view" (p.9).

This approach is also based on the assumption that my role as researcher was not that of an independent and objective observer. Rather, my role was that of "research instrument" and as such my interactions with the research participants were capable of influencing the research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Steps taken to address this phenomenon are discussed in the sections which pertain to the interview process and researcher expectations.

The Setting

The operation of school council networks in two different Alberta school jurisdictions was the focus of this interpretive study. One of these networks was formally established in February of 1996. This jurisdiction had policy in place to guide the operation and functioning of its network of school councils and was open to participation by all of the school councils (approximately thirty) in the jurisdiction. Fifteen to twenty school councils were typically represented at each network meeting. Five interviews were conducted with network participants from this jurisdiction. After an initial round of data

analysis, one further interview was subsequently conducted regarding a network of school councils which had served as the precedent for this network.

The other jurisdiction did not have policy in place enabling the operation of the networks of school councils. The networks in this jurisdiction were grass-roots initiatives and simply existed because those who participated in them chose to do so. Initially, there was one network operating in this jurisdiction. The establishment meeting for this network was held in June of 1995. This network did not involve all of the approximately 80 school councils in the jurisdiction, rather, it was a subgroup of school councils. Participation in this network was open only to those school councils whose schools were located in within the boundaries of the network. Of the 12 school s that were eligible to participate, 8 -10 school councils were typically represented at each network meeting. Five interviews were conducted with participants of this network.

While this study was in progress, I became aware of a second network of school councils which was operating in another area in this jurisdiction. It began as a grass-roots initiative in the fall of 1997 and was modeled after the aforementioned network. One interview was conducted in this second network. Approximately 13 school councils were eligible to participate in this network and their meetings usually had 6 or 7 school councils represented. This network met four times during the 1997-98 school year but did not continue to meet during the 1998-99 school year.

In addition to these grass-roots initiatives, this jurisdiction operated an umbrella group of school councils which was open to participation by all of the approximately 80 school councils in the jurisdiction. This umbrella group of school councils had been in operation for about ten years at the time of this study and was the formally recognized vehicle for school council participation.

Data Collection

To gain information about my question, to inform the interview schedule, and to provide a context for the data analysis, I observed at one network organizational meeting, six network meetings, and two umbrella group school council meetings. In addition I was asked to serve as a facilitator at two additional meetings for one of the networks during

the time the study was on-going. Field notes were kept of these observations, as were minutes of the meetings, copies of policies, and handouts provided at the meetings. However, this information was intended to serve as background to the study, therefore, these data were not included in the analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were the source of the data used in this study. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select respondents who could serve as key informants about the network of school councils. Twelve interviews, each lasting from one to two hours, were conducted in total. Four network chairpersons (parents), three school council representatives (parents), two trustees, two central office administrators, and one school administrator were interviewed. It was anticipated that the nature of their involvement would enable these participants to have a depth of understanding that would provide "thick" description of these school council networks and the nature of involvement that the respondents perceived or experienced as meaningful. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned to the participants for their review, comments and revisions before they were included in the data analysis. In the interest of confidentiality, the data for this study were not reported as separate networks.

Interview Questions

Twelve questions guided the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). However, participants were encouraged to talk about networks of school councils and meaningful involvement from their individual perspectives. This approach was in keeping with Oakley's feminist-based interviewing model "which requires openness, emotional engagement, and the development of a potentially long-term trusting relationship between the interviewer and the subject" (as cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 352). To facilitate discussion, the respondents were provided with an introductory letter containing a general outline of the research questions,(see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing throughout this interpretive study. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded into themes using a reflective approach to analyze

the data. Thematic analysis was conducted using both deductive and inductive techniques. The constant comparative method was used in analyzing the data and in coding the themes, first, by comparing items in each category, then drawing up categories, and then comparing categories (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

The guidelines provided by Merriam (1988), and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1997) were followed in conducting the open coding. According to Merriam "developing categories, typologies, or themes involves looking for recurring regularities in the data" (p.133). Merriam advises that while "devising categories is largely an intuitive process, . . . it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and 'the constructs made explicit by the participants of the study' (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p.191)" (p.133). Strauss and Corbin elaborate further and advise:

> Open coding in grounded theory method is the analytic process by which concepts are identified and developed in terms of their properties and dimensions. The basic analytic procedures by which this is accomplished are: the asking of questions about data; and the making of comparisons for similarities and differences between each incident, event, and other instances of phenomena. Similar events and incidents are labeled and grouped to form categories. (p.74)

To maintain trustworthiness of the data for credibility and dependability the transcripts were reviewed by the respondents for their revision and comments. As well, the findings, in general, were reviewed in informal conversations with other school council and network participants who provided verbal feedback. Once this analysis was complete it was reviewed by a professional colleague and three selected study participants.

An interpretive approach, which reflects the respondents' perceptions about networks of school councils and meaningful involvement, is used in reporting the data.

Assumptions

It was assumed that the study participants would be able to describe if and how the networks of school councils enabled them to be meaningfully involved in the public

education system. As well, it was assumed that the study participants volunteered to participate in the study without duress and that they shared their understandings honestly.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

The study is delimited to include participants from four different networks of school councils in two Alberta school jurisdictions. Participants were delimited to members of networks of school councils who were invited and willing to participate in this study.

Limitations

Potential weaknesses of this study are: (a) the substantial reliance upon the perceptions of the network members with regard to the development and effects of participation in a network of school councils; (b)the skill and knowledge of the researcher in conducting the interviews and in analyzing the data provided by the interviews; and (c) the influences of the researcher's bias as proponent of the concept of a network of school councils and as an advocate for parental involvement in education.

I feel that the limitation of reliance on interview data has been minimized because twelve extensive interviews, each lasting from one to two hours, contributed to the development of trustworthy data. In addition, while my observations took place over the span of one year, I also spent significant amounts of time either facilitating workshops or discussing networks of school councils within the two jurisdictions which were the central focus of this study. This enabled me to develop sound relationships with many of the participants who participated in this study. According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992) "time is a major factor in the acquisition of trustworthy data. Time at your research site, time spent interviewing, time to build sound relationships with respondents–all contribute to trustworthy data" (p.146).

Initially, because the majority of the people who were interviewed were supportive of these networks I was concerned that this would be a limitation to the study. However, I did interview at least one person who raised several issues about these

networks of school councils. From my informal conversations I recognized these issues as very representative of the kinds of questions which are typically raised about networks of school councils. As a result, I feel this limitation has also been minimized.

Role of the Researcher

It was clearly understood by those who participated in the study that I did not hold any formal role in the education system and that my interest in this subject area was as a parent and not as an educator. This, I think, is likely an unusual stance for a graduate student conducting research in the Faculty of Education, and may well have influenced the response of the participants. In particular, parents may have felt more at ease than would have been the case if the researcher held a professional role within the public education system.

With one exception, those I interviewed were strong advocates for parental and community involvement in the public education system and for networks of school councils. As mentioned above, my role as a proponent of parental and community involvement and as a proponent of networks of school councils was well known to all of the study participants. My sense is that this empathetic stance as a researcher helped to put these respondents at ease during the interviews and may have contributed to the trustworthiness of the data. Such an approach is in keeping with Oakley's feminist-based interviewing model where the relationship between the researcher and subject reflects "an ethic of commitment and equalitarianism in contrast with the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation" (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.353).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct this study was requested through the appropriate administrative channels of the jurisdictions and from the network chairpersons and those who participated in the study. As well, the research proposal for this study was reviewed and approved by the Department of Educational Policy Studies Ethics Review Committee. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they had the right to withdraw at any time, and that every effort would be made to guarantee

confidentiality. To further assure confidentiality, the data for this study were amalgamated. In addition, in the presentation of the findings, sometimes the respondents were referred to by their roles and sometimes they were referred to simply as network or study participants, and when pronouns were used they may or may not correctly reflect the gender of the respondent. Finally, because each jurisdiction uses quite distinct names to refer to both the umbrella groups of school councils and the networks of school councils I eliminated their use in the text. Instead of referring to them by name, I have inserted [School Council Umbrella Group] or [Network of School Councils] in the text in their place. In addition, care was taken to ensure that quotations used did not reveal the identities of the study participants.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature which is directly related to this research problem addresses the following questions: What issues underlie the call for increased parental participation and community involvement in the public education system? What substantiates the call for increased participation and involvement? What are the barriers and challenges that confront the successful implementation of participatory reforms? What role do school councils and networks of school councils play in enabling participatory reforms?

The Call for Participation and Involvement

The importance of parental participation in the education of children as a means to enhance student success, and the importance of the process of community involvement in public schools as a means to enhance participatory democracy, have been recurrent themes in the education literature since the 1960s and are once again, emerging as important issues in the field of education (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Minzey and LeTarte, 1994, p.211). This time, however, it appears that the issues related to parental participation and community involvement are receiving serious attention from both educators and policy-makers alike (Renihan & Renihan, 1994). Cibulka (1994) maintains that this renewed interest is not just another passing fad, and that what we are currently experiencing is actually a fundamental transition in our approach to family-school-community relations (p.1).

This change in direction can be attributed to a complex combination of societal changes, political forces, and research findings. In terms of societal changes, as we approach the 21st century and continue what Delors (1996) terms the "extraordinary expansion of knowledge," it is becoming increasingly apparent that the education system will need to adapt (p.16). Many authors suggest that what was essentially a professional enterprise will need to expand and provide for a more active role for parents, families, and community (Delors, 1996; Dimmock, O'Donoghue, & Robb, 1996; Flaxman & Inger, 1992 cited in Renihan & Reninhan). Renihan and Renihan (1994) maintain that "in a rapidly changing, uncertain world, parents and schools need each other more than ever" if

they are to adapt to the new economic realties of two income families, changing family structures, increased demands from the workplace, and changes to curriculum and teaching necessitated by the reform and restructuring of education.

In terms of political developments, many governments, in keeping with both neo-liberal and neo-conservative thinking, have seized upon increased participation and involvement as an element of restructuring their systems of education and attaining their ideological goals (see, for example, Dimock, O'Donaghue, & Robb, 1997).

However, the most salient arguments which support the move in this direction stem from two key factors. First, an increased understanding of the positive effects of participation and involvement on student achievement and school effectiveness; and second, an increased understanding of the principles and processes inherent to more participatory systems of democracy. It is to these two key factors that the discussion now turns.

A Means to Enhance Student Success and Foster Effective Schools

A substantial body of educational research conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and elsewhere has provided compelling evidence "as impressive as any in the field of educational change" to demonstrate the powerful effects that families play in promoting student success in school (Fullan, 1991, p.228). For example, the U.S.A. National PTA (1997) concluded,

> Over 30 years of research has proven beyond dispute the positive connection between parent involvement and student success. Effectively engaging parents and families in the education of their children has the potential to be far more transformational than any other type of education reform. (p.5)

In addition, Henderson and Berla (1994), after conducting an extensive review of the research in this area, have concluded that "the evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school but throughout life" (p.1). Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that these benefits accrue regardless of the socio-economic, cultural, or educational status of the families involved (Epstein, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Moles, 1997).

Henderson and Berla (1994) advise that many studies have shown that better relationships between the home and the school not only lead to higher grades and test scores for students, but also lead to better school attendance and the completion of more homework; fewer placements in special education; more positive attitudes and behavior; higher graduation rates; and greater enrollment in post-secondary education. In addition, they maintain that studies have also shown that students are not the only benefactors–families and communities benefit as well. Benefits to families include enhanced parental confidence in the school, self-confidence in their ability to help their children succeed in school, and in themselves as parents. Benefits to schools and communities include improved teacher morale, higher ratings of teachers by parents, more support from families, higher student achievement, and better reputations in the community. These findings have led Henderson and Berla to conclude that "when parents are involved in their children's education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved at school, their children go farther in school, and the schools they go to are better" (p.1).

However, what is becoming increasingly clear is that it is not simply parent involvement per se that actually leads to these benefits. Rather, it is a particular form of involvement which has the most promising potential for enabling more children and youth to reach their full potential and achieve success as learners. This involvement is best described as a partnership between the school, the family, and the community. Epstein (1994) explains why partnership is the preferable approach to increasing parental and community involvement in schools and in the education of children.

> The term "school, family, and community partnerships" is a better, broader term than "parent involvement" to express the shared interests, responsibilities, investments, and the overlapping influences of family, school and community for the education and development of the children they share across the school years. The broader term emphasizes that the institutions share the major responsibilities for children's education and development and that all–school, family, and community–are needed to support children as students. (p.39)

This concept of partnership is in keeping with Coleman's Theory of Social Capital. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) describe social capital as the assets in a community which

result from the formation of social relations between persons. In their studies on Catholic schools these authors point to the critical importance of social capital in building effective schools. They maintain that schools can be a major source of social capital if they focus on establishing "'a clear and consistent set of norms that express the dominant values of the community'" (as cited in Lane, 1991, p.120). Lane concurs, "effective schools are really no more than effective school communities sharing norms and values about the teaching-learning process" (p. 120).

The process of forming the shared norms and values is, in part, the process that enables the development of the social relations essential for the development of social capital. However, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) maintain that the fostering of shared norms and values is dependent, not only upon the development of social relations, but is also dependent upon the "closure of networks created by these relations" (p.222). By this they mean that it is necessary for all members of the community to interact with all other members of the community so that the shared norms and values can be articulated, communicated, and upheld. According to Putnam "'building social capital requires strengthening the social connections among people in a community, connections that are necessary for people to organize themselves and to address their collective needs and problems'" (as cited in Wehlage and White, 1995, p.2).

Social capital is thought to be integral to enabling effective schools. That is to say, public schools will be more effective and students will be more successful if all members of the school community (parents, teachers, students, staff and other members of the community) value and support the work of the public schools and encourage and support students to do their best in school. Students, then, because of the consistency of the message throughout the community–not just in school–are more likely to perceive that learning is important and that there are a number of committed people both within and without the school who value learning and who want them to succeed in school.

Nevertheless, the reasons for involving parents in the public education system are not substantiated solely by student achievement and school effectiveness. As Henderson (1988) points out, "ultimately, involving parents in education touches on much larger questions than improving reading and math scores. Citizens in our democracy must

participate in the governing of public institutions" (p.153). Sarason (1995) concurs and suggests that "the principles justifying parental involvement lead one to opportunities and dilemmas far beyond what is conventionally meant by parental involvement" (p.15).

A Means to Further Participatory Democracy

The second key argument supporting the move to increase participation and involvement in schools is the recognition of the fact that "citizens in our democracy must participate in the governing of public institutions" (Henderson, 1988, p.153). This crucial recognition is based in part on the "principle of subsidiarity" which means that all those who will be influenced by a decision have a right to participate in the decision making process (Sarason, 1995). It is also based on our increased understanding of the critical importance of the community involvement process as a means to further the development of participatory democracy (Minzey & LeTarte, 1994, pp. 190-191). Accordingly, the renewed interest shown by policy makers in fostering enhanced participation and involvement in schools can been seen as an attempt to make our schools more "democratic" (Dimmock, O'Donoghue, & Robb, 1996; Henderson, 1988; Renihan & Renihan, 1994).

Sarason (1995) maintains that the guiding principle which justifies parental involvement in the governance structures of our public education system is that "when you are going to be affected, directly or indirectly, by a decision, you should stand in some relationship to the decision-making process"(p.7). He defines this as the political principle and maintains that "what the political principle implies is that the decision-making process should reflect the views of all those who will be affected by the ultimate decision. More correctly, it should be a process where those views and their supporting evidence are heard" (p.39). Renihan and Renihan (1994) also contend that involvement by parents is a "basic right" which has its roots in the principle of subsidiarity "which, loosely interpreted, means that those who are closest to being influenced by decisions should have a hand in making them" (p.17).

These principles strike at the very nature of democracy itself. Maxcy (1995) suggests that "a new postmodern vision of cultural democracy has been launched. Today,

political theorists speak of this postliberal and postmodern democracy as participatory democracy (Dryzek, 1990), strong democracy (Barber, 1984), and cultural democracy (Reyes, 1993)" (p.127). Strike (1993) advises that if more emphasis is to be placed on participation in the democratic process it will be necessary to reconceptualize the nature of our democratic institutions. He maintains that it will be necessary "to see them more as forums for collective deliberations than as legislatures representing the interest of citizens" (p.256). This, he advises, will require a reconceptualization of schools as "local deliberative communities that seek rational consensus about their work through open and undominated discussion" (p.266).

It appears, then, that increasing parental participation and community involvement in the public education system will require a fundamental change in how the relationship between community and the nature of the democratic process, as it pertains to the governance of public education, is conceptualized. Strike points out that this reconceptualization envisions an understanding of school communities as being sufficiently small in size so as to provide the opportunity for face-to-face decision-making. He correctly advises that this view raises a concern regarding the members of the larger political community who are external to the school, but who are not currently members of the school community–that is citizens and taxpayers. He suggests that a reconceptualization of local school governance that would attend to this concern would require "a more hybrid conception of democratic governance" (p.256).

Strike advises that this will require a reconceptualization of the role of the school board in a way that balances Locke's concern for legislative sovereignty with Habermas' concern for discursive communities. He suggests that school boards should no longer be viewed solely as "policy-making institutions." Instead, he recommends that we consider them as "representatives of the voice of the political community in the deliberations of the local school community" (p.267). He suggests that this would result in education decisions being made, through discussion, at the school with the "active participation of the school board or some of its members and 'percolate up' to the board for further discussion and review. Here the school board would be less a policy making institution than a speaker in the school's discourse" (p. 268).

He further advises that there are two critical components to this role. First, that the school board be considered as the "sovereign of last resort." By this he means that they would develop policies that impact the district as a whole, they would hold the authority when the interests of the larger community were at stake, and they would have the authority to intervene if conflict could not be resolved at the local school level. The second critical component is that teachers actively participate in the discussion as "firsts among equals" but that they "not be relieved of their burden to persuade the community" (p.268).

Golarz (1994) suggests that the need to reconceptualize our understanding of democracy is not only limited to the public education system. Rather, he maintains that there is an international change occurring in the evolution of democracy; that democracy is evolving from a representative democracy to a participatory democracy, and this change will affect all of our public institutions. Moreover, he advises that the legacy we can offer the twenty-first century may be our understanding of democratic principles. If this is to hold true for Canada, as well as for the rest of the democratic world, then the role of Canadian school boards in local school governance will need to change. Indeed, Townsend (1987) maintains that "'community involvement in school might be the first step to a better practice of the democratic ideal'" (as cited in Renihan & Renihan, 1994, p.21).

The Barriers and Challenges Confronting Participatory Reforms

While there is considerable evidence to support the call for increased parental and community involvement as a means to enhance student success and further the practice of a better democratic ideal, the research to date suggests that such reforms have not been successful. A number of writers have pointed out that we have yet to implement successful participatory reforms (see, for example, Anderson, 1998 or Maxcy, 1994). Anderson advises,

> There are signs that the participatory reform movement in education is running into problems. For example, several case studies have suggested that shared governance structures may not result in significant participation in decisions (Malen & Ogawa, 1988) but, instead, result in contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994), reinforce privilege (Lipman,

> 1997) and even create a tighter iron cage of control for participants (Anderson & Grinbergk 1998; Barker, 1993). There is also evidence that they may be costly to service, waste members' time, delay important decisions, and lead to inefficiency and lower productivity (Beare, 1993). . . . Many participants are reporting a sense of disempowerment rather than empowerment from so-called participatory reforms and, in the case of education, are increasingly calling for more authentic ways to participate in the governance of their schools. (1998, pp. 572-573)

A confused and confusing picture begins to emerge. On the one hand, there is recognition of the value of more meaningful involvement as a means to reform and improve the effectiveness of public schools and as a means to enable more participation in the democratic decision making processes of the public education system. On the other hand, the success at implementing such reform has clearly been called into question. As Anderson points out,

> Current educational reforms . . . contain a pervasive discourse of participation. Although calls for participation of teachers, students, parents, communities, business, and numerous other stakeholder in schools are central to most reforms, there is increasing evidence that much participatory reform is either bogus, superficial or ineffective. (1998, p. 571)

A Confused and Confusing Picture

Levin and Young (1994) contend that despite the acknowledgment of the importance of family involvement in "promoting success in schools," schools have done little to "develop structured links with parents, and home-school relations are still often characterized by a considerable degree of unease" (p.212). They maintain that the barriers to involvement include an "inherent incompatibility of families and schools as social institutions" and "teachers' long standing ambition to be afforded the status and prestige of true professionals" (pp. 212-213). Furthermore, they argue that this desire for professionalization requires that teachers see themselves

> as the possessors of a unique and specialized body of knowledge that is unavailable to others, the pursuit of such recognition has the dual effect of both devaluing, in the eyes of the school, the knowledge that parents possess about their children and discouraging teachers from sharing their knowledge with the "non-professional" parents, even though these are essential elements of meaningful collaboration. (p.213)

This notion that parents should or could participate formally with the professionals and the politicians in the public education system is relatively new. Riley (1994) maintains that throughout the twentieth century "the notion that parents held specific knowledge of children was not acknowledged" (p.15). In Alberta, it was not until the introduction of the 1988 School Act that parents were first given the opportunity "for direct and formal input into the educational decision making process" (Miller, 1995, p.5). Otherwise, involvement of parents and community in Alberta schools has typically occurred on an informal basis through "parent associations, home and school groups or similar organizations" (O'Reilly, 1995, p.10).

The legislation mandating school councils in 1995 further entrenched the right of parents to play a formal role in the public education system by giving them the right, at their discretion, to advise and consult the principals and the board respecting any matter relating to the school. However, Murphy (1991) contends that while the intent of such reforms is "to provide parents the opportunity to comment on the activities of schools, in practice they usually offered little more than token involvement" (p.64).

Furthermore, resistance to such formal participation is present, not only to involving parents in the school, but also to involving parents and other members of the school community in the traditional hierarchical power structures of the school system. Professionalism and bureaucratic power serve as forceful inhibitors of the community involvement process and, as a result, significantly impair the ability of both parents and other community members to participate in the democratic decision making processes of the public education system. As Sarason (1995) points out, "resistance to the political principle characterizes relationships among the different layers of administrative power in the school system" (p. 35).

Professionalism, Power and Participation

McKnight (1995) provides some insight into the tension which exists among professional practice, citizen participation, and community involvement in public service institutions. He maintains that not only have we ascribed the right to the professional to meet the need (be it educational, medical or social), we have also ascribed to the

professionals the right to define what that need is. This, he maintains, creates a unilateral relationship between professional and non-professional which is disabling and decidedly undemocratic. According to McKnight,

> The disabling function of unilateral professional help is the hidden assumption that "you will be better because I, the professional, know better. . . . There is no greater power than the right to define the question. From that right flows a set of necessary answers. If the servicer can effectively assert the right to define the appropriate question, he has the power to determine the need of his neighbor rather than to meet his neighbor's need. . . . When the capacity to define the problem becomes a professional prerogative, citizens no longer exist. The prerogative removes the citizen as problem-definer, much less problem-solver. It translates political functions into technical and technological problems. (pp. 47-48)

According to Sarason (1995) this propensity to characterize public education as an exclusively "professional" undertaking severely limits educators' ability to view parents and members of the broader community as assets in the educational process.

> Nothing blinds you more effectively to perceiving and utilizing the assets of others than to view them in terms of labels and power status, a view most efficiently inculcated in us in our professional training and even more efficiently reinforced by the hierarchical structure of school systems. (p.48)

In other words, the traditional views of professionalism often serve to impede increased parental participation and community involvement in the public education system. The extent to which professional teachers perceive public education to be a shared or collaborative endeavor significantly influences the extent to which participatory reforms actually increase participation and involvement in the public education system.

Conversely, the extent to which parents perceive public education to be a collaborative or shared endeavor influences their conception of their role in their children's formal education. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) point out that parents will not likely become more active participants in their children's education unless they come to define their role in this way. These writers have identified three factors that affect parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education: their role construction (whether they view involvement as part of their role); their sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school (whether they feel they have the *ability* to do

so); and their perceptions about whether the child and the school want them to be involved. Crowson (1992) suggests that increasing parental involvement will not only require that parents see that they have a role to play but will also depend upon a number of other factors.

> The demands of breadwinning and parenting can leave little time for becoming involved in the school. A residue of distrust and wariness can continue to fuel parental apathy and anger toward the public school long after the school changes from closed to open (Comer, 1986). Parents in some neighbourhoods (and particularly from some cultural backgrounds) may feel that it is *the school's* job to educate and that it is not proper for parents to interfere (Ogbu, 1974). Finally, parents may avoid contact with the school simply because they feel out of place, insecure, and ill-prepared to converse with college-educated professionals. (p.195)

In other words, parents must feel welcome in the school, feel needed as active participants in the teaching-learning process, and be provided the necessary support and information to enable them to do so, before they are likely to become active and willing participants in the public education system. Many writers agree that teachers have an important role to play in helping parents understand the critical importance of their involvement and in helping parents develop the necessary skills to become effective participants in the teaching-learning process (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Renihan & Renihan, 1994).

As well, there is considerable consensus in the literature about the important role the principal plays in enhancing parental participation and community involvement in public schools. Indeed, according to Crowson (1992),

> The evidence is that the building principal's role is key to success . . . irrespective of the school *district's* emphasis on community relations, the individual principal's *receptivity to the community* was the single most important determinant of any community-relations differences between one school and another. (p.197)

While the literature is clear that school principals will have to adopt facilitative and consensual leadership styles in order to effectively engage parents and the broader school community in the school through participation in school councils, it is also clear that the will to do so is often lacking. The stark reality is: the implementation of school

councils involves a shift in power throughout the educational hierarchy and the principal's role stands to be affected the most (Chapman, 1984; Harte & Kennedy, 1996).

The William's Report, which looked at the implementation of school councils in Newfoundland, concluded:

> Because many school administrators are not accustomed to public input in school decision making, many will be skeptical about the value of school councils. Also, because many parents lack direct experience in school decision making, especially in some areas of the province, many may not want to get involved. The report claims that in order for the proposed model of governance to be successful, these problems will have to be addressed and that changes in attitudes and expectations will be necessary among both administrators and parents. (as cited in Harte & Kennedy, 1996, p.48)

Harte and Kennedy's research supports the findings of The William's Report.

> Strong barriers to effective school councils and increased parental involvement prevail within our education system. Traditional approaches to parent and community involvement in schooling appear to be the predominant model with parents and community playing, at best, supportive roles. The effectiveness of school councils, it would appear, will depend upon a number of factors including clear delineation of roles, extensive training for both school council members and school administrators, and the availability of resources to support a new role for the school principal. (p.54)

Goldring (1986), in her research on the implementation of decision making school councils in Chicago concurs that the attitude of the school principal is critical in "determining the amount of and the effectiveness of parental participation" (p.116).

> These research studies concluded that both the functioning and the influence of parent advisory committees were dependent upon the attitude of principals toward these committees. . . . In many schools, the mechanisms for parental involvement were in place, but principals' negative attitudes prevented them from being used effectively. (p.116)

This has been a long standing problem in education and occurs whether or not the school council has decision making or advisory status. Chapman (1984), in studying the implementation of school councils with advisory status in the state of Victoria in Australia over twenty years ago, reported that,

> Despite the changes in structure and function introduced by the 1975 Act, some principals, at least, through their control of the council agenda, their linguistic skill in persuading and influencing councilors, and their monopoly of information about the day to day operation and internal administration of the schools, were able to ensure their continued dominance in relationships with council members. Of critical significance was the principals' attitude: Where principals showed positive leadership and elicited strong support from staff and parents, the new council was likely to demonstrate a strong sense of purpose and a strong spirit of confidence. Where principals proved hesitant to change, school councils tended to be hesitant and confused about their authority. (p.48)

Some of the most complex issues which have to be resolved before participatory reforms can be implemented successfully concern the roles of central offices and school boards. The current hierarchical nature of school boards can place them in contention with the more democratic processes needed to increase parental participation and community involvement in the public education system. Feinberg (1993) provides some insight into this phenomenon: "Non-democratic groups are organized in hierarchical ways where orders flow from the top to the bottom and accountability flows from the bottom to the top, and where rituals and traditions reinforce beliefs about authority that are held uncritically" (p.209). According to McKnight (1995),

> Whenever hierarchical systems become more powerful than the community, we see the flow of authority, resources, skills, dollars, legitimacy, and capacities away from communities to service systems. In fact, institutionalized systems grow at the expense of communities. As institutions gain power, communities lose their potency and the consent of community is replaced by the control of systems; the care of community is replaced by the service of systems; the citizens of community are replaced by the clients and consumers of institutional products. (p.168)

McKnight further maintains that when we do not involve the community in the development of public policy, the policy which is developed will not succeed in meeting the community needs. He suggests that the essential reason for not including the community in the formation of public policy is because to do so puts the leaders of the service systems in "direct competition with communities for the power to correctly define problems and provide scientific solutions and professional services" (p.168).

School boards are traditionally viewed as the bastions of local democracy and as the mechanism by which to involve community in the problem solving process with respect to educational concerns. Increasingly, especially in large urban school districts, the opportunity that school boards provide for citizen participation in the decision making process has come into question. Certainly, Sarason (1995) claims that the ability of school boards to provide a political forum is at best a "myth" (p.108). School boards have come to be seen as "an elite trusteeship" forming large and distant "oligarchies" which are "unresponsive" to local desires (Iannaccone & Lutz; Lawton, 1993). Furthermore, they are frequently seen to be captives of school district administrations that focus on the micro-management issues of administration, instead of focusing on the development of educational policy (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Danzenberger, 1994; Kirst, 1994; Vivone, 1996). In other words, school boards increasingly are focused on meeting the needs of central bureaucracies and furthering the agendas of administrators, rather than on providing opportunities for citizens to help build and sustain a strong public education system.

Danzberger and Friedman (1997) point out why it is essential to include community in the democratic problem solving processes of public education.

> The broad community involvement and support that today's schools so desperately need can only be achieved through the hard work of open and real public dialogue. The problems today's schools face defy solution, not because of a lack of good ideas, but because of the lack of common ground and shared resolve needed to make ideas work. And these can arise only if people work out their differences and learn to work together by learning to talk together. (p.748)

Delors (1996), too, stresses the importance of community involvement in public education.

> Local community participation in assessing needs by means of a dialogue with the public authorities and groups concerned in society is a first, essential stage in broadening access to education and improving its quality. Continuing the dialogue by ways of the media, community discussions, parent education and on-the-job teacher training usually helps create awareness, sharpen judgment and develop local capacities. When communities assume greater responsibility for their own development, they learn to appreciate the role of education both as a way of achieving

societal objectives and as a desirable improvement of the quality of life. (p.27)

The community empowerment model is often presented as an alternative to school boards. Indeed, this was the model first put forward (but later withdrawn because of lack of support) by the government of Alberta when they first undertook to mandate school councils. But, as Snauwaert points out, this model can often "threaten to undermine the imperative of professionalization" (1993, p.100). He further maintains that the community empowerment model is frequently based on a "weighted" representative system and therefore fails to provide an "adequate degree of direct participation" for non-representative members of the school community (p. 100). He maintains that "what is needed, is a balanced, integrated system of governance that provides full and equal participation for all the parties" (p.100). Strike (1993) holds a similar view and advises that what is needed is an approach which "reduces the tension between democracy and efficiency" and places less emphasis on representation and more emphasis on participation in local school governance (p.262).

In other words, all members of the school community have a critical role to play in the governance of public education and room must be made within the traditional bureaucratic power structures to accommodate that role. In Alberta, school councils are the formal structures which are intended to enhance participation in local school governance.

Enabling Participation and Involvement

School councils and networks of school councils are new boundary-spanning organizations which have the capacity to enable parental participation and community involvement throughout the public education system. They are able to do so by fostering more permeable boundaries between the school and the school community and between the school board and the school councils. More permeable boundaries enable increased interaction among families, schools, and communities (Fullan & Quinn, 1996). In other words, school councils enable increased interaction of parents and other members of the community in schools; networks of school councils enable increased interaction between and amongst school councils and the school board.

The Role of School Councils

The emergence of school councils is occurring as part of a "systemic shift in the relationship between communities and schools that is both inevitable and that contains the seeds of a necessary realignment with the family and other social agencies" (Fullan & Quinn, 1996, p.3). Most governments which undertake to restructure their systems of education choose to implement some form of a school site council (Beare, 1993; House, 1992; Murphy, 1991). However, considerable variation exists as to the purpose, roles, responsibilities, and powers of these councils (Beare, 1993; David, 1995; Nova Scotia Department of Education, 1994; O'Reilly, 1995; Peters, 1996; Rideout, 1995). In addition, the understanding that the various participants (parents, teachers, community members, and students) have about the role that each member of the school council should play, are varied and, often, quite dissonant (Beare, 1993; David, 1995; Johnston & Hedemann, 1994). Accordingly, confusion and frustration about the role of the school council is common (Collins, Cooper, & Whitmore, 1995; Skau, 1996).

The Minister's Forums on School Councils M. L. A. Working Group advised that "school councils have a mandate to involve parents and the community in the education of children in Alberta. Through school councils, Albertans assume an advisory role in local educational matters ranging from academic programs to school policies and budgeting" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.4). However, the Working Group also reported that there is much uncertainty, amongst those who participated in the consultation process, about the nature of the involvement that school councils are intended to provide for parents and other members of the school community.

> During the course of the public forums, it became apparent many members of school councils were unaware of all the areas in which they could be involved if they so chose. This finding was supported by workbook responses which appeared to indicate that only 44% of respondents believed they fully understood their roles and responsibilities. (p.14)

While there is much uncertainty about school councils, the literature does suggest that the successful implementation of school councils will require the provision of training, assistance, and support for school council members (Collins, Cooper, &

Whitmore, 1995; O'Reilly, 1995; Rideout, 1995). This view was supported by the M. L. A. Working Group. They recommended:

> That Alberta Learning, in partnership with school boards as well as other stakeholders, ensure there is sufficient opportunity for school council members to receive training. School council member training should include, but not be limited to:
>
> - understanding the roles and responsibilities of school council members
> - setting goals for the school council
> - developing and monitoring a business plan for the school councils
> - developing school council bylaws
> - improving communication skills (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.15).

Given the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the nature of involvement that school councils are intended to provide and the lack of clarity regarding the nature of involvement that is perceived to be meaningful, the kind of training, assistance and support that would be helpful to school council members is open to question. How can training help school council members to understand their roles and responsibilities when there is considerable uncertainty about what those roles and responsibilities should be? How can training help school councils set goals when the role of the school council is not clear? Furthermore, should school councils be developing goals independent of the school's goals, or, should school councils be participating in the development of the school goals? Is it appropriate for school councils to have a business plan when school councils clearly are not businesses? Would it not be more appropriate for them to have a strategic plan that describes how the school council will involve parents and other members of the community in the education of children and youth? Who should school councils be communicating with once they've improved their communication skills?

These questions speak to the need to clarify the nature of involvement that school councils are intended to promote and the nature of involvement that parents and other members of the school community perceive or experience as meaningful. The opportunity that networks of school councils provide for school council members to talk to each other about the answers to these questions–or others like them–may prove to be helpful in enhancing the effectiveness of school councils.

The Role of Networks of School Councils

Networks of school councils are beginning to form in some school jurisdictions in Alberta. The role that these networks are intended to play and the means by which their roles are to be determined are not prescribed by the legislation. In addition, little is known or written about them. However, the final report of the Minister's Forums on School Councils M. L. A. Working Group did advise "that school boards should be encouraged to establish Councils of School Councils within their districts" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.16). According to the report,

> Evaluations from many of the attendees at the public forums indicated they valued the opportunity to meet with members of other school councils. This interaction allowed them to discuss common concerns and share solutions to common problems.
>
> Establishing Councils of School Councils would provide school councils within a district with the opportunity to share their best practices. It would also allow school councils to develop common positions on matters of common interest and aid in communicating those positions to their board of education. Such Councils of Councils already exist in several areas of the province. A number of school councils identified this approach as one of the "best practices" which helped make them highly effective. (p.16)

It seems that networks of school councils have the potential to fulfill two key functions: 1) to serve as a mechanism for dialogue through which the network participants can share information with each other; 2) to serve as a mechanism by which school councils can provide advice to the board of trustees.

A Mechanism to Enable Dialogue

One way to provide assistance and support for school councils could be through the mutual sharing of information amongst school council representatives. Peters (1987) advises that corporate success is often achieved, not by focusing on developing a unique plan or approach, but by copying what is known to work best. Levine (1991) suggests that a similar approach is necessary for creating effective schools. "Effective schools' projects should seek out and consider using materials, methods, and approaches that have been successful in schools and projects elsewhere" (p.392). If this approach is effective in

creating successful corporations and effective schools, it may also be successful in creating effective school councils.

According to Glickman (1993), when school planning teams are linked they are able to support and assist each other in the development of their respective school plans. Golarz and Golarz (1995) also suggest a similar process with respect to the successful implementation of participatory governance. "After the site-based teams are formed and functioning, a system-wide council should be established to facilitate communication between the schools in the district" (p.96). In addition Collins, Cooper, and Whitmore (1996) also advise of the importance of effective communication between school councils. They further recommend that communication between the school councils and the school board is essential for the effective development of the school council.

Recognition of the importance of effective communication and mutual support as a means to enable the effective functioning of school councils is also supported by the concepts common to the learning organization literature. Central to the notion of the learning organization is the view that "human beings everywhere are being forced to develop their capacity to think together–to develop collaborative thought and coordinated action" (Isaacs, 1993, p.24). This view seems to underlie the motivation to link school councils together through a network of school councils. If an organization is to become a learning organization it is necessary for the organization to create organizational structures that "encourage learning, innovation, creativity, new insights and practices" (Center for Public Management, 1994, p.12). The importance of structure in creating a learning organization is also emphasized by Watkins and Marsick (1993). That structure must foster a sense of connection and a "high level of interdependence if each part of the organization is to learn from the others" (p.265).

Lieberman (1996) has identified that "educational reform networks" are fast becoming an important alternative to conventional modes of teacher and school development" (p.51). She maintains that networks are a more flexible organizational form which can better embrace the "ambiguous," "complex," and "unfinished processes" characteristic of the teaching-learning process. The process of implementing school councils can also be aptly described as "ambiguous," "complex," and "unfinished." It

follows then, that school council networks may foster professional growth and development for school council members and for school councils in the same way that education reform networks do for teachers and for schools.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the establishment of a network of school councils comes from the social sciences, where there is evidence to suggest that mutual aid organizations provide a potentially powerful source of support. "The establishment of community networks of support, which emphasize and mobilize the strengths of community members, will be a necessary component of the new approach to service delivery" (Alberta Commissioner of Services for Children, 1994, p.7).

A Mechanism to Advise the Board

In Alberta, school councils also have the right to provide advice to school boards regarding any matter relating to the school. However, they need a mechanism to do so. An organizational structure, such as a network of school councils, might serve as such a mechanism. However, a number of challenges and barriers will probably have to be resolved before networks of school councils can effectively fulfill this role. According to Peters (1997),

> There is considerable potential for conflict when school councils begin to move into policy areas where boards have traditionally operated. . . . boards will have difficulties reconciling different demands, couched as advice, from different school communities. Unless these tensions are resolved satisfactorily, membership on both school boards and school advisory councils may become even less attractive than they are at present. (p.19)

Concluding Remarks

As discussed above, the call for increased parental participation and community involvement in the public education system can be attributed to a complex combination of societal changes, political forces and research findings. Fundamental changes which are occurring in both families and schools necessitate the strengthening of the relationship between them. However, the needs of families and school are not usually what drives education reform agendas. Instead, calls for increased participation and involvement often stem from ideologically driven political agendas. Nevertheless, a substantial body of

research points to the critical importance of participation and involvement as a means to enhance student success and improve our schools; and, as a means to make the public education system more democratic.

In spite of considerable research which supports the call for increased parental and community involvement, there is increasing evidence to suggest that attempts to implement participatory reforms do not usually lead to increased participation and involvement in the democratic decision making processes of educational institutions or organizations. It is now becoming apparent that if participatory reforms are to achieve their intended purposes, a number of difficult problems will have to be resolved. To this end, issues that relate to power, professionalism, and community participation will have to be addressed if the intended outcomes of such participatory reforms are to become a reality.

School councils and networks of school councils are new boundary spanning organizations which have the capacity to enable parental participation and community involvement in the public education system. However, unless those who participate in them view their participation as meaningful, it is unlikely that school councils and networks of school councils will achieve their intended purposes. As Maxcy (1994) points out, "before people can commit themselves to ideals . . . they must first find them meaningful" (p.46). The purpose of this study was to shed some light on the nature of involvement that was found to be meaningful by those who participate in networks of school councils.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the experiences and perspectives of the seven parents, two trustees and three administrators who participated in the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study. Networks of school councils are new developments in Alberta and very little is known about them. This exploratory study gives some indication of what led to the development of these networks, the purpose of the networks, the conditions which enabled their effective implementation, some of the benefits of these networks, some of the concerns about these networks, and the nature of involvement that was experienced or perceived as meaningful by the study participants. In the interest of confidentiality the information from the seven parents, three administrators and two trustees have been combined in this account. Findings are reported under the following research questions:

1. What led to the development of these networks of school councils?
2. What were the goals of these networks of school councils?
3. How were these networks of school councils implemented?
4. What sustained their implementation?
5. What were the benefits of these networks of school councils?
6. What was the nature of involvement experienced or perceived as meaningful?

What Led to the Development of these Networks of School Councils?

Problems with Umbrella Groups

The networks of school councils which were the focus of this study were preceded either by umbrella groups of school advisory councils or by umbrella groups of school councils. These umbrella groups would meet one to three times per year. Typically, these meetings were called by administration, chaired by the superintendent or central office personnel, and attended by school council chairs or their representatives, central administrative personnel, and the trustees of the board. According to the respondents, these meetings were used primarily as an information vehicle to give the board of trustees and central administration an opportunity to provide information to the school council

representatives that the board of trustees or central administration felt parents either wanted or needed to know. It also provided the board and central administration with an opportunity to get feedback on policies that were being developed–but only if they chose to do so. As one administrator explained,

> It was really, I guess you could say, a central office agenda. Things that we felt we were hearing that people wanted to know about or in some cases things that we felt they should know about, or we wanted their information if we were developing a policy and so on.

Some of the parents who participated in these school council umbrella groups became frustrated and increasingly dissatisfied with this "top-down" approach. They were dissatisfied with the lack of opportunity that parents had to voice their concerns, to ask questions or to participate in discussions about the education of their children. One parent described these meetings as a "one way street."

> In our district they bring school council chairs together on a regular basis and eight years ago when I was chair of the school council, at that time, I attended these meetings and at the time the meetings were primarily focused on the board and administration giving information to the school councils chairs. It was very much of a one way street.

Some parents even believed that parents were "not allowed to meet with each other" to discuss their concerns:

> And so, . . . I said to people, . . ."Are you guys interested in getting together on a regular basis to talk about some of this stuff?" And one of the women, at the time, said to me "Well, we are not allowed to." And I said "What do you mean we're not allowed to?" And she said "We're not allowed to by the district." And I sort of chuckled to myself and I said "Well, how can they not allow us to? We're just people, individual volunteers, we're not staff or anything." It was interesting to me because it was very much a perception that we really weren't allowed to, which I thought was sort of intriguing. Anyway I said "Well, you know, we can meet wherever we want, whenever we want, nobody can not let us meet." And so the couple of women expressed interest, at that time, and I had said I would try and organize a meeting.

The perception of these parents was that these umbrella groups were simply intended to enable information dissemination and to pay "lip service" to the notion of parental involvement.

Lack of Authentic Parental Voice

Parents questioned whether they had a legitimate and authentic voice in the public education system through participation in these school council umbrella groups, and, in the words of one parent, "they wanted some of that." When they did try to express their views, these parents did not perceive that the board of trustees and central administration were willing to listen or to respond to their concerns.

> We came together because we were tired of going to [School Council Umbrella Group] meetings and being talked to and never asking for our input, never asking what was important to us as school council chairs to have on agendas; and so we wanted to get together to share information.

One parent described the frustration that led to the development of networks of school councils in this way:

> I think that the [School Council Umbrella Group] reps from each school became frustrated, or some of them did, at the lack of ability to influence the agenda of these meetings. And so there was a push one year to make changes to the[School Council Umbrella Group] policy so that the board would recognize that the [School Council Umbrella Group] representatives would elect a chair from those school reps and it became a much more parent driven organization.

These parents were no longer content to let the board of trustees and central administration control and direct their opportunities for involvement. Nor were they willing to let central administration and the trustees determine the items that would be discussed at umbrella group meetings. Furthermore, they wanted to be able to voice their perspective at these meetings as well as listen to the trustees' and central administrators' points of view. Their discontent led them to seek changes that would enable them to have a genuine and authentic voice in deliberations about educational issues and concerns. In order to do so they felt they needed to be accurately and adequately informed. However, another one of their frustrations was their inability to access information, that they either wanted or needed to know, in a timely way.

Inaccessibility of Information

These parents felt that their ability to participate effectively in discussions about public education depended upon their ability to be fully and accurately informed about

educational matters. However, their ability to obtain the necessary information depended upon the willingness of the board of trustees or central administration to give it to them. The experience of the parents who initiated these networks of school councils was that they were often unable to get the information they thought was important, helpful, or relevant–unless the board of trustees or central administration wanted them to have it.

To add to their frustration, parents often found that the information they received was not always complete. As one parent explained, "you only get what information people want you to get. You don't get the real information." Yet, parents perceived that access to the "real information" was essential if they were to be enlightened and effective participants in these umbrella group meetings.

> One particular meeting an item of special interest to parents was removed at the last minute or was never addressed at the meeting and that made several people very angry. And from that, I think, came the resolve that we had to take this group and make it much more our group than theirs. And so that's when we decided that we would get together and come up with some changes to . . . empower the [Network of School Councils] and to elect our own chair, to set our own agendas, etc.

So, it appears that these networks of school councils were initiated because parents had become dissatisfied or frustrated with the nature of the participation afforded by the umbrella groups. They were no longer content to serve as the passive recipients of information. They wanted to have an equal and an informed voice in deliberations about educational issues that pertained to the public education system.

This dissatisfaction and frustration led these parents to initiate changes which resulted in the establishment of these networks of school councils. This occurred in one of two ways: informally, that is, at the initiation of some school council representatives who simply began to meet on a regular basis as a network of school councils, and formally, through the development and adoption of policy enabling the establishment of the network of school councils. A central question which underlies the focus of this study is: What were these parents hoping to achieve by establishing these networks of school councils?

What Were The Goals of These Networks of School Councils?

These parents wanted an organization of school councils that would provide them with genuine opportunities to participate authentically in the public education system; have an equal, informed, and engaged voice in deliberations about educational matters; provide advice to the board of trustees; access the real information; share information with other school council representatives and with the trustees and central administration; discuss the information that was shared; and act in ways that would enhance or improve the education of their children and the public education system as a whole.

These parents did not want the networks of school councils to become another fundraising organization or another bureaucratic organization that replaced the voice of the individual school councils. As well, they did not want to take on any of the responsibility or the duties of the board of trustees.

An Organization to Enable Authentic Participation

What was particularly frustrating for these parents was that these original school council umbrella groups were "passed off" as an opportunity for them to provide input and be consulted about the education of their children. But, in reality, the policy decisions continued to be made in isolation from the parents and the school councils. Participation in these umbrella groups was, at best, perceived to be ineffective, superficial or contrived. At worst, it was viewed as a conscious attempt to actually limit or restrict parental and school council participation in the public education system. One parent described the involvement in the umbrella groups as "pretend involvement." He explained the difference between authentic and pretend involvement by giving the following example:

> I guess what I mean by meaningful, and it helps me to give an example. . . . In my mind meaningful involvement and an effective school council involvement would be a school council that from the get go says that this is what's important to us, these are the kind of programs we want, this is the kind of emphasis we want in our school and that a school council is involved in developing the priorities, the programs, the goals for the school. Then, this is the pot of money we have and together we sit down with parents and teachers and community and say "Here's our pot. Here's who we want to be. How do we use this money to get there?" And so you

might have discussions about class sizes, about staffing–not about individuals–but the kind of people we want. That, you know, if you want an emphasis on music, the kind of staff we would need to attract, and the kind of professional development that the school council needs, these parents need, the teachers need, the kind of way you need to communicate. That, to me, is meaningful and effective.

My experience has been, that, what happens is: there's an item on the agenda called "budget" and the principal comes and says here's the budget . . . and you have ten minutes on the school council agenda. It's up on an overhead, its got categories and money and everyone nods and smiles and says, "Thank you" and you may have one or two people say "Well, what do you mean by this?" or, "What do you mean by this?" but it is quite clear that this has been done by the professionals and, that it's really being presented as information. That to me is ineffective and it's not meaningful involvement, but my experience has been that it's passed off as being meaningful. "We consulted with the school council. We discussed the budget." To me that's, "We showed them what it is."

The notion of "contrived collaboration" has been explored by Hargreaves (1994) in his work on "contrived collegiality" among teachers. While contrived collegiality of teachers is not at issue here, the same micro-political issues which underlie the phenomenon of contrived collegiality also underlie the phenomenon of contrived collaboration as it applies to parental involvement, school councils, and networks of school councils. Hargreaves (1994) suggests that in "micropolitical" and "sociopolitical" terms contrived collaboration is not just personal insensitivity by some administrators. Rather, it is a function of "sociopolitical and administrative systems that are less than fully serious about their rhetorical commitment to teacher empowerment"(p.208). The same can be said of parental or school council involvement.

In addition, Hargreaves describes contrived collaboration as "an issue of willingness to give communities . . . the necessary flexibility to work with each other in developing programs of their own" (p.208). Certainly this was the experience of the parents who first initiated these networks of school councils. These parents felt that unless significant changes were made in the way these original umbrella groups were structured and functioned, their involvement would continue to be superficial and contrived. They wanted an organization that would provide them with genuine and

authentic opportunities to have an equal and informed voice in deliberations, with other school council representatives, trustees, and administrators, about the public education system.

An Equal, Informed and Engaged Voice

These parents did not want to be passive observers of their children's education. They felt that this traditional role did not capitalize on the knowledge parents had about their children and about their school communities. They wanted changes made to the umbrella group meetings that would enable them to share this information with each other and with the professionals and trustees. In particular they wanted a genuine opportunity to influence the policy making process, that is, provide advice to the board of trustees. They also wanted the opportunity to "access the real information" and to "network," that is, talk to each other openly and frankly about education issues or concerns.

Genuine Opportunities to Provide Advice

One of the key purposes of these networks of school councils was to provide genuine opportunities to parents and school councils to advise the board of trustees and central administration on matters of policies, priorities, programs, budgets, and philosophies with respect to the education of the children in the jurisdiction. Parents wanted a genuine opportunity to participate in deliberations with the board of trustees and with central administration about issues that were of common concern to parents and school councils throughout the jurisdiction. That is to say, these networks of school councils were intended to provide parents with a more equitable role in the policy making process. As one network chairperson explained,

> I think part of my desire was to make sure the [network of school council] reps understood that they were peers, and that they had a specific function that was equally important to the whole process as the school board or the district administration or the school administration. And, until we could be seen in that light, with the same respect, not with the same expertise, obviously I would never expect that. . . . That was not the intent, but we had to be treated with the same respect and accorded the same opportunity to have a role in the policy making process. And that was all we were ever

> really after. . . . And it's sometimes as simple as standing up and saying, "Hello here we are and we are no longer accepting of a process that excludes any input or any opportunity for input."

This did not mean that parents wanted to run the schools or manage the school district. One parent clarified the difference between having a role in the policy making process and managing the day to day operations of the school or the jurisdiction in this way:

> I think it's a grave error to prioritize or to rank the roles of the stake holders but I think that's what happened in the past, though. Everybody needs to be given the same respect and the same opportunity to impact policy. I want to be sure you understand that doesn't mean I think parents should be in making day to day decisions of the school. That's why we have administrators, and we should let them do their job.

Access to the "Real Information"

These school council networks, were intended to enable the school council representatives to access the "real information" about educational issues. Parents had a sense that if they came together and talked to each other on a regular basis they could piece together whatever they were able to glean in their respective school communities and eventually figure out the reality of the situation. In addition, rather than being totally dependent upon the board of trustees and central administration to provide them with information, parents felt they could enhance their access to information by communicating directly with each other and with other school councils. In other words, parents saw these networks of school councils as an opportunity for them to circumvent the ability of the board of trustees or central administration to control the information they could access. As one parent explained,

> So we decided, initially, that it was just to share any kind of information that would help us as school council chairs and as school communities be more involved and be involved in meaningful ways. Not just information about hot dog days and bake sales but about educational issues. . . . we started to hear from other people that there were neat things happening and some of us are saying "Well we want those neat things to be happening for us too." So it was like this: when you're in your own little world, in your own little school you think this is life and this is the way it is. But the minute you talk to other people you realize "Oh my gosh, there's different

> ways of doing things." A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing! You start to realize "Oh, maybe there are other ways to function in the world" and we wanted some of that.

In addition to accessing the real information, the school council representatives also wanted to have regular opportunities to talk with other school council representatives, trustees, and administrators.

Systematic Opportunities to Talk to Each Other

Consistently throughout the study the respondents indicated that the central purpose of these networks was to enable the network participants to "share information" and to "network" with each other. One participant said that sharing information with each other was the "whole purpose of the organization" and defined networking as "frank discussions of things that are of current interest within the school system." As one parent explained,

> We wanted to discuss administrative and system wide issues as well as school issues. In fact, I would say most of our policy focused on system wide issues. Whether it was the district's discipline policy, whether it was their lunch program policy, whether it was transportation, the budget, principal selection criteria. There were lots of issues, that we covered, that would have been germane to every school in the district.

Another parent described the opportunity to talk to others about education issues as the motivating factor in establishing the network of school councils. She described her reaction after observing at another network's meeting:

> So we went there and we were just blown away. . . . It was just so amazing to us to see principals, and teachers, and parents sitting around a table and just discussing issues in a really positive way because that isn't something we'd seen in our school. So we thought wouldn't it be just wonderful to get our [Network of School Councils] up and running as well.

Trustees, too, wanted the opportunity to talk more regularly with their constituents. One trustee described the network as a "bridge for connecting with the community from which we've been elected."

> If you buy into the concept that a person is elected to represent their constituents, representative democracy, then how else do you do that if you

> don't connect with those people and become sensitized to their issues, concerns, aspirations, and wishes and begin to address those at the policy level.

As well, these networks were intended to enhance communication amongst the school councils themselves so that school councils did not become islands unto themselves. As one administrator explained, "We have always been interested in operating as a school system as opposed to a system of schools and so when the legislation came out . . . it was pretty natural for us to put together a [Network of School Councils]."

The intent, then, of these networks was, in part, to provide parents and school councils with authentic opportunities to have an equal, informed and engaged voice in the public education system. To this end, these networks were intended to provide school council representatives with genuine opportunities to provide advice to the board of trustees and, conversely, to be consulted by the board of trustee on matters relating to philosophies, policies, programs, priorities, and budgets. As well, they were intended to enable parents and other members of the school community to have better access to information about the public education system and to provide systematic and structured opportunities for the network participants to talk to each other about educational issues and concerns.

Effective Participation

In addition, these networks were also intended to enable parents to participate in the public education system in ways that would make a genuine difference for students. As one parent explained, "we're in there to do the best we can for our kids, to make our kids' education work for them." In order to achieve this goal, the respondents indicated that, at times, they could be more effective if they acted collectively, that is, as a group of school councils, than if they acted as individual parents or school councils. As a result, another goal of these networks was to enable the collective action of the school councils.

To Make a Difference for Students

What it meant to be meaningfully involved in the education of children and youth differed amongst the respondents who participated in this study. At best, it was a rather elusive and variable concept. Never the less, inherent in each respondent's interpretation of what it meant to be meaningfully involved was the desire to be provided genuine and authentic opportunities to act in ways that would enrich the lives of the students. One parent recalled an opportunity where she felt she had participated meaningfully in her role as school council chair:

> Last spring when we had this problem and went to the school board, it related to the English program at my children's school and my kids are in French Immersion. I did not have the time and I did not have any real interest in pursuing this cause. Actually I've been fairly on the fence about whether we would be better off as just a French Immersion school or as a dual track school, frankly. But I felt as chair, and as somebody who has the skills to put together a presentation and make a presentation effectively, that I really had to be involved in it, and I was. And I felt I made a really big difference in how the board perceived it. . . . To me that's being meaningfully involved. It's: "I've participated in something and I really felt I made a difference."

These parents wanted to have an organization of school councils that acknowledged their capacities and provided them the opportunity to be active and effective participants in the public education system in ways that would benefit the students' learning. As one parent explained,

> And so we saw the [Network of School Councils] as being able to deal with school policies, system policies, as a chance for us to network to find ways to improve our schools. Through all of this, obviously, the focus was to improve education for our KIDS and that's why we were there. People are busy and the people who would come to [network] meetings obviously had other things that they could have been doing–but we all had a desire to improve education for our children. That was the motivating factor. No one took on the [Network Of School Councils] because they didn't have something else to do or because there were some other advantages to it.

In other words, these networks of school councils were intended to provide network participants with genuine opportunities to make a positive contribution to the

public education system in ways that would enhance the student's education. These parents realized that, at times, they could be more effective if they acted collectively.

To Act Collectively

These networks of school councils were also intended to enable school councils to take collective action–if and when they felt it was necessary and appropriate. The network participants were well aware of the strength of their collective voice in influencing the board of trustees or the provincial government on issues of common concern.

> Going through the school council and through the [Network Of School Councils] I think may carry a little more weight with senior administrative staff than some phone call from a parent individually through a school. I mean there are two routes through the system. You can pick up the telephone and you can start with the principal and go up until you hit the superintendent, chairman of the school board, your local trustee. If that same problem is brought up and discussed at the [Network Of School Councils'] meetings and the superintendent sees that eighty percent of the school councils are in agreement with this particular issue I think maybe that carries a little more weight and things get done a little faster.

In addition to the strength of the collective voice, one parent observed that parents generally might be more likely to participate in the public education system as a member of a group rather than as an individual. She attributed this to the fact that there is less personal risk involved in expressing a point of view when you are a member of a group than when you are voicing your concerns as an individual.

> I could see this happening with any number of topics. A group of schools would come together and say, "Wait a minute, as a group, we see a problem with this, and we would like you to address it." I think that a lot of individuals are hesitant to make presentations, but when it's a group of people, they'll participate and it'll strengthen and they will go that little extra further because it is a group, and they don't feel that aloneness.

The respondents were very clear about what they wanted these networks of school councils to enable them to do. They were also very clear about what they did not want the network to do. They did not want the network of school councils to become another fundraising organization, another bureaucratic organization or another layer in the

organizational hierarchy of the public education system, and they did not want the network to take on any of the responsibilities of the board of trustees. They simply wanted the network to enable their participation in the democratic decision making processes of the jurisdiction.

Not a Fundraising Organization

One key factor in ensuring that these networks of school councils would focus on policy and not be relegated to the roles traditionally ascribed to parent groups was to ensure that they would not be seen as a fundraising body. As one parent explained,

> When we were deciding what our role was we deliberately excluded fundraising because in the past we've had problems, I think, with parent groups doing fundraising along with other things but then becoming known as the fundraising group. We did not want to be seen as a fundraising group, we wanted to be seen as a policy oriented group. So that there would be no misunderstanding we wanted to make clear that our role was not to raise money for the schools. Our role was to impact the policy making process. So we felt we needed to make clear that that is where we wanted to be players, not in raising money. We were already doing that on a school level, and that was fine. Some school councils have even decided that they will not fundraise because they don't want that confusion to take place. It becomes way too easy to shift you off as the fundraising group and then limit the opportunities to impact policy.

Not Another Bureaucracy

These network of school councils were also not intended to become another layer in the bureaucratic organization of the jurisdiction, nor were they intended to be organized as a bureaucratic hierarchy. Rather, they were intended to serve as vehicles for collaboration and to enable networking and information sharing. One respondent described the network as a structure to "bring people together" and to "facilitate collaboration."

> The process was to involve school councils and parents at the school level so that they could have an opportunity to voice their opinion of things–not just create another bureaucratic organization that would pretend or have the pretense of always representing their views. We didn't want to do that.

This meant that these networks were not intended to make decisions on behalf of the school councils. At times the network of school councils might choose to put forward a collective position but this did not preclude the individual school councils in the jurisdiction from bringing forward their individual positions as well. Nor did it bind the individual school councils to the collective decision. School councils were free to act on their own behalf at all times and were not obligated to adopt the network of school councils' positions as their own. As one trustee explained,

> When they talk about an issue, on some topics they'll take a formal vote and say, for example, "To respond to this position paper, this will be the[Network of School Councils'] position" and they vote yeah or nay. But rarely do they come to "this is the [Network of School Councils'] position." . . . they leave it as "Here was the discussion at the [Network of School Councils]" and the school councils will go back and forward their position, based on taking this information and other information they have, to the school council. Each school council makes its own decision. The [Network of School Councils] doesn't dictate what anybody's position should be. It's a sharing of information and then take it back and make sure[for example] you answer the private school funding task force paper. Not, here's how to, but make sure you do. We talked about it here at the [network] meeting, but school councils make sure you answer. You know, just that kind of responsibility.

Furthermore, on issues of provincial concern, school councils who participated in the network of school councils were under no obligation to represent the network of school council's position or the board's position as their own. For example, in one jurisdiction, when the school board submitted its position to the government on the funding of private schools trustees encouraged each of the school councils to also submit a report to the task force, and they discussed the issue at a network of school councils meeting, but they made it clear that the school councils were under no obligation to adopt either of these views. One of the trustees explained their approach,

> We didn't tell them what they had to submit. We explained to them what we had done and how we reached our position and asked them to respond. We didn't tell them what they had to say–we respect their intelligence and integrity. . . . We do ask them to do it though.

Not Intended To Replace the Board of Trustees

As well, these networks of school councils were not intended to replace the board of trustees or to assume any of the responsibilities of the board of trustees. Rather, they were simply intended to provide the school councils with an opportunity to provide advice to the board of trustees. In other words, they were intended to inform the policy and decision making processes of the board of trustees–not replace them. However, as one trustee pointed out, a commonly expressed concern about networks of school councils is that the implicit intent of these networks *is* to replace the board of trustees:

> There is definitely a fear of [networks of school councils]. . . . there was definitely a concern about why would you do this. "This is absurd. You're duplicating the board, you're replacing the board, they're going to try to take over the board, they're going to try to run your jurisdiction," and things like that.
>
> I just said I don't know why you would think that. If parents wanted that job they would have taken it. And they told us clearly, when the government was putting out the school councils legislation, change the words from "you shall" and "you shall" and "you will" to "if you want to"–"we're not educators, we don't want the job of educating you know. If we were, we would have become a teacher."

While trustees and central administrators may have fears about these network of school councils trying to take over the board or trying to run the district, none of the parents who participated in this study expressed the desire to do so. As one trustee explained,

> Now parents clearly said that they want meaningful input and there is that fear that they'll replace the board–but totally the opposite has happened. When we've said to them "Look, we're debating this issue and here's both sides of the fence . . . and we'd like to know what you guys think." By the time they're done their conversation the comment I've heard more often than not is "Boy, I'm glad I'm not making the final decision on which way to go on this." It's created the understanding of the board's job and role and central office–and parents have said, "No we don't want it. You're accountable for it and we want you to do a good job, but no–I'm not going to run to be a trustee." So I think it's just fear of the unknown.

The important point here is that neither the individual trustees nor the board as a whole had any obligation to adopt a position put forward by the network of school

councils. However, as the respondents pointed out, astute trustees would listen very carefully to what the members of the network had to say–particularly if the network had reached a consensus on an issue.

In summary, it appears that the primary goal of these networks of school councils was to create an organization that would provide parents and school councils with authentic opportunities to have an equal, enlightened, and engaged voice in deliberations about the public education system, and in doing so, empower them to make a positive contribution to their children's education and to the public education system as a whole. The question then becomes, what was it about these networks of school councils that would enable them to do so, when the original umbrella groups could not? The answer lies in the ways that these networks of school councils were implemented and sustained.

How Were These Networks of School Councils Implemented?

Necessary Conditions

These networks of school councils were intended to confront the superficiality and contrivance of the original school council umbrella groups and to enable authentic, informed, deliberative, and effective participation of parents and school councils in the public education system. To achieve these ends, these networks were democratic and the school councils retained ownership and control of the network. As well, these networks were loosely knit organizations which enabled flexible, informal, and voluntary participation. They were small enough in size to enable "face to face" conversations and were configured such that the participants had something in common to talk about. The timely dissemination of understandable information between and amongst the board, central administration, school councils, and the broader school community was crucial for their effective functioning. Dialogue was the essential process of the network.

School Council Ownership

According to the respondents, an important feature of these networks of school councils was that they were organized and supervised by the school councils and not by the board of trustees or central administration. The study respondents believed that if the

information that was shared at these network meetings was to be relevant to the parents and school councils, then the parents and school councils–not the board of trustees or central administration–should have "ownership" of the organization. In order to achieve such ownership it was felt that the school councils themselves should decide if, when, and how they would participate in a network of school councils.

In one jurisdiction, because they were wanting to ensure that the school councils retained ownership of the network, the board consulted extensively with the school councils in the development of a policy which formally enabled the network. They began by holding a workshop attended by school council representatives and members of the board of trustees. Beginning with a "draft policy" that had been provided by central administration, the school council representatives and the trustees broke into small groups to review and revise the draft. These initial revisions were then reviewed by the group as a whole and incorporated into the draft policy. They worked until the whole group had reached consensus about the contents of the draft policy. This information then went back to central administration and the initial draft policy was revised to include this input. The revised policy then came back to another meeting of the school council representatives and trustees, where it was reviewed again to ensure that it did, in fact, reflect what they had agreed upon. Once the final draft was approved by the school council representatives it then went to the board of trustees for formal approval–but on the understanding that it would be adopted as put forward. This process was seen to be essential in ensuring that the school councils felt a sense of ownership for this network of school councils. As one of the trustees explained,

> You have to be able to accept that you're going to pass a policy that they decided on without changing anything. I mean, if you're going to ask them to develop their policy and then it comes and you're going to change it, then it's not their policy anymore. So as a board, you have to be prepared to do that, otherwise you haven't totally given them ownership.

In another jurisdiction quite a different approach was taken in attending to the need for ownership. Two school council chairpersons took the initiative to invite principals, trustees, and school council chairpersons from a sub-group of schools to attend a meeting to discuss the concept of a network of school councils. The concept was

positively received by those attending the meeting and by their respective school councils, and so they began to meet on a regular basis as a network of school councils. One member of this network explained the reasoning for this approach,

> We were very clear that change needed to occur from a grass-roots level. The other model, of which we were aware, had board policy and had support from the board level, secretarial help, etc. But we felt that board policy would be the death knell for ours because you only get the information people want you to get. You don't get the real information.

While there was quite a difference in the way these two networks were established, they were strikingly similar in their structure and operation. Both networks situated the ownership of the network of school councils with the school councils and not with the board of trustees or central administration; both were democratic, and both retained control of the agenda through an elected chairperson who was required to be a school council representative and to chair the network meetings.

School Council Controlled

Every school council in either the jurisdiction or in the jurisdictional sub-group was provided the opportunity to participate in the network of school councils and accorded one vote in the organization. All other participants (trustees, central administration, principals, and others) were non-voting members. The chairperson was elected by the voting members, retained control of the agenda, and chaired the meetings.

Elected chairperson. An elected chairperson, chosen only by the school council representatives, was viewed as crucial to ensuring that these networks of school councils continued to be "owned" by the school councils once they were established. As well, ensuring that the chair was the choice of the school councils enabled the school councils to control the activities of the group. As one parent explained,

> It was very empowering to the school council reps to decide who we wanted to be in control of the group, who would chair the meetings. . . . it went from the superintendent, then, to one of the parent reps as the [Network of School Councils] chair and that individual would call the meetings.

Difficulties arose in one network when they decided not to elect a chairperson. Instead of an elected chair, the chairperson rotated from meeting to meeting and was determined by the school council which was hosting the meeting. According to one respondent, this network experienced considerable difficulty in moving the format of the meetings away from "information presentations" to information sharing sessions– although the latter had originally been the intent of the group. This network eventually identified that this was due, in part, to the lack of a consistent chairperson and had begun to look for someone who might be willing to take on this responsibility.

Control of the agenda. Control of the agenda was seen to be critical to maintaining school council ownership of these networks of school councils. As one parent explained,

> Previously the superintendent would stand up and he would chair the meeting. (It was always a he.) He would chair the meeting, and had set the agenda–so there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity to impact that. But, with the election of a chair from one of the reps to the [Network of School Councils] that substantially altered that situation and we had a great deal more control over the organization.

By controlling the agenda, parents and school councils could ensure that the meetings would address matters that they felt were relevant or important. As one parent explained,

> Well it gave us the opportunity to decide what to put on it [the agenda] which was a tremendous change. The person who gets to make the choice has got a tremendous amount of influence over what gets discussed. And this certainly worked well with administration, there was no attempt to be anything other than proactive. They just saw things, perhaps in a different way. But by being able to set the agenda, we were able to introduce topics that maybe they didn't feel were timely or necessary or appropriate, but that didn't matter any longer.

While the chairperson and the agenda were controlled by the school councils, the opportunity to contribute items to the agenda was not restricted to the school council representatives. The agenda was "wide open" to anyone who wanted to contribute to it. As one school council representative explained,

> The chair writes the agenda, but anyone can have input. So if there's something that happens at our school council meeting that we would like to get some feedback from the larger group on, we can phone her and put it on the agenda.

One network chairperson described the agenda writing process this way:

> The agenda is set by the participants, if they have something, information they want to bring to us, great, if they have information they want feed back on, great. Anybody can phone information, or put items on the agenda.

It is important to note that, while anyone could contribute items to the agenda, there were limitations as to the type of things that could be discussed at the network meetings. One jurisdiction stipulated clearly, in the policy enabling the network, that personnel issues were not to be discussed at the network of school councils meetings. This point was also made clear in the other jurisdiction when the networks first began to meet. As well, it was clearly understood, in both jurisdictions, that these network meetings were public meetings and not appropriate forums for discussions about specific individuals or students.

Loosely Knit Organizations

A key element of these networks of school councils was that they were very loosely knit organizations. Membership in them was flexible and voluntary. As well, they were informal enough and small enough to enable meaningful dialogue amongst the participants.

Flexible membership. Most of the people who attended the network meetings were school council representatives. However, the meetings could also be attended by trustees, representatives from central administration, school principals, and other resource people. In one jurisdiction, the superintendent and chairman of the board of trustees were required by policy to attend the meetings and the communications officer was required to provide support to the Network of School Councils. In the other jurisdiction the trustees were invited– but not required–to attend, representation from central administration was by invitation and no communication support was provided by central office.

It is important to note that classroom teachers did not participate in either of these networks, although they certainly were free to do so. In one jurisdiction, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) representative did attend the meetings regularly.

The decision to participate in the network was left up to each school council. Each school council, in accordance with the configuration of the network, made the decision about whether or not it wanted to send a representative or representatives to the network meetings. The means by which the school councils were represented varied. As well, the way the representatives were chosen varied from school to school. The key objective, however, was to keep the participation open and flexible and to leave the decision about who would attend up to each school council. As one administrator put it, "The network of school councils isn't hung up in any way as to who can attend and who can't."

One network encouraged each school council to designate one representative to attend the network meetings. Sometimes it was the school council chairperson, sometimes it was a delegate of the chairperson, and sometimes it was a representative chosen by the school council specifically for the task. Another network encouraged each school council to send a minimum of two representatives to the meetings, and some school councils would send three or four representatives to each meeting. This was done, in part, to provide continuity in the event that one of the representatives was unable to attend a particular meeting. In addition, it was thought that parents might be more comfortable representing the views of their school communities if they did not have to attend alone.

> We decided at the very first meeting that each school council would appoint two representatives to bring the views of their school councils. The reason we chose two instead of one, was . . . we thought if we're discussing an issue and if I'm there by myself representing my school trying to think "Gee I wonder how our community would feel about this?" I might be a lot more confident in saying what I think my community's view is, if there is another person from my community that I can turn to and say "Like what do you think our people think, will they think this, will they think that."

One particular issue, with respect to membership, was whether or not school principals should attend the network of school councils' meetings. In one jurisdiction it was not really seen to be the purview of the principal, however, they were welcome to attend the meetings, but typically did not choose to do so. They did, however, all receive

copies of the minutes of the meetings. The chairperson of this network explained why principals did not participate directly in the Network of School Councils:

> I think it allows people the freedom to say what they want knowing full well that there aren't going to be repercussions at their local school level. . . . where you've got a principal who is resisting the formation of a school council I think the discussions might be a little bit quieter, if that person were sitting in the room.

In the other jurisdiction, the principals were invited to attend the Network of School Councils' meetings but the decision about whether or not to attend was left up to the principals. Some played a fairly active role in the network, others attended occasionally and others not at all. The minutes of the network meetings were available to all of the principals whose school councils participated in this network whether they, or anyone else from their school council, were in attendance. One principal who did attend the network meetings fairly regularly described the dynamic of the principal's presence at these meetings in this way:

> I think it's good set up the way it is now, but a concern, a small concern, is that sometimes when you have administrators there with the parents, there'll be a different level of communication because the principal is there. And then if you take it another level, and if you have a trustee there, I think that will again change the level of conversation. I guess what I'm trying to say is that maybe there are times when parents would like to just talk to parents without input from administrators and trustees. I know that even when trustees are at the meeting I'm always very careful to sort out what I'm saying. Like these guys are, you know, my boss. . . . Now having said that, the fact that you have all the players sitting around the table working together, that is a huge plus too.

The issue about whether or not the principals should attend was complex, and was in essence a question of trust. One network originally wanted to include both the school council chair and the school principal in the network meetings. When they were establishing the network of school councils they held an organizational meeting to which they had invited a representative from another network of school councils to speak to them about how their network was organized. This other network did not include the principals in the network meetings. They asked this representative,

> " Why don't principals participate in your [Network of School Councils]?" She was very candid and said "Because we're afraid they'll subvert the process, quite frankly." And the principals present agreed that they shouldn't be a formal part of this[network of school councils.] And I had never thought . . . that people would defer to this natural authority of the principal. The original intent was not to exclude them though, that was really important to us.

When principals did attend the meeting they tended to act as a resource. As one parent explained,

> They're invited to every meeting. When they do come, most of them, I find, sit back and let the chairs or the representatives do the discussion. But when topics come up that need an administrator's view point, they're quite willing to share that.

In both jurisdictions, trustees were invited to attend the meetings of the networks of school councils as non-voting members. The choice to include the trustees was left up to the school councils. One trustee explained the process used in her jurisdiction to decide if trustees should participate in the network of school councils,

> We left it to the [Network of School Councils] as to whether or not they wanted attendance. Did they or didn't they want trustees there? If so, how many? And we very much let it be their choice. And their choice has been to ask all trustees when they'd like to come, to come. So they've left an open invitation.

One network, which was organized as a group of school councils in a large municipality, cut across several wards from which trustees were elected. They resolved concerns about which trustees should attend the network meetings in this way,

> They are invited guests. We weren't aware of a policy within the board that each trustee usually only attends meetings in their ward. And because our council pulls from three different wards, our school area has three wards represented, the trustees were hesitant to come to a meeting in another trustee's ward. So an invitation was extended to them that we would like to see them attend our meetings, no matter where they were.

Other participants in these networks included specific central office personnel or others who were invited to attend as resource people. In addition, the networks occasionally received requests from other interested people to attend the meetings–either as observers or to present information. These requests were considered and approved by

the chairperson who often consulted with other members of the network to get their views regarding the request.

Informal structure. The lack of a formal structure was perceived to be key to the effectiveness of these networks of school councils. One trustee described it as a structure to enable networking. For all intents and purposes, in both jurisdictions, the organizational structure was really no more than a scheduled opportunity to get together to talk about what was going on in the jurisdiction. So all that was necessary was just enough structure to enable participation and to facilitate discussion. None of the networks had bylaws and that was a conscious choice for each of them. One respondent, described the network as a "loose knit volunteer organization." Another respondent described the organizational structure in this way,

> It's very informal, there's no threat to anybody. There is no policy, no bylaws, nothing. Subjects of interest come from the group on whatever we're going to discuss. Our chairperson is very knowledgeable and very aware of what's going on as far as provincial legislation or civic issues or anything. Because she is so knowledgeable she does guide the group somewhat and she brings lots of topics to the meetings, you know, but I don't think it's for her own interest. It's just to facilitate information sharing and if we want to pursue it we can.

One administrator described the organizational structure of the network in the following way:

> We haven't tried to be very prescriptive. I think we have encouraged each of our school councils to name a representative to the [Network of School Councils] and I believe that most of them have. In fact I believe all of them have. And so, one of those members would be attending. Now you know if a particular school wants to send two people, we haven't found any difficulty with that in terms, of numbers of people attending. This committee tends to want to operate in an informal fashion. That is to say they operate only in accordance with our board policy. They don't have their own set of bylaws and that's a deliberate choice on their part. And we're not interested in indicating to them how they operate. We're only interested from the point of view that it assists in determining system directions.

Voluntary. The school act does not require the establishment of a network of school councils. Rather, it simply enables school councils to advise the board if they so

choose. It does not spell out how that can, or should, be done. School councils in these two jurisdictions were not required by the board or by any one else to have a representative at the network meetings. One jurisdiction had policy in place that required the school board chair and the superintendent to liase with the network of school councils–but for everyone else participation was voluntary. As one administrator explained,

> You can't demand involvement. So what you have to do is just open it up and say "Here's your opportunity." Now we're going to think no less of you if you choose not to be involved. If you decide that you're too busy right now to provide us with some input, then that's okay. We're not going to mark off who has provided us input and who hasn't. When the time comes where you get something you think you need to provide input on, then you provide us input. If you want to pass, pass is okay.

One principal described why he thought it was important to leave attendance optional, not only for the school councils, but for the principals as well,

> I know as a principal I get my back up sometimes when I'm told "You have to be there." You know, I think we're all professionals from the school based people, and if we need to be there for the good of our community and the kids we'll be there. I think you have to be kind of careful if you get too formal. I know there are some principals that probably don't go to any of the meetings and their schools are not that well represented. I guess that's their choice, but to turn around and say that you have to be there is ridiculous. If they don't want to be there then they don't see the use to it. Well! C'est la vie!

Small Size

Respondents felt that these networks needed to be small enough to facilitate and enable dialogue amongst the participants. As one parent explained, these networks of school councils needed to be "small group process oriented" and needed to be "interactive." Another parent pointed out that many parents are intimidated by a large group and that large groups were unable to foster the "feeling of togetherness" needed for parents to feel comfortable enough to engage in a dialogue and to share information. Another parent advised that "With hundreds of people in a room it's hard to have meaningful dialogue and meaningful input for any kind of change in a group that size."

In addition to being small enough to enable dialogue these networks of school councils also needed to be small enough to enable the participants to build relationships with each other. One parent commented that good relationships were key to sharing information openly and honestly, "It's taken three years for us to get to the point where we can talk without any emotion about difficult issues. We are able to do this now because we've built relationships with each other."

Share a Common Bond

One of the issues that was of concern to some of the respondents in this study was how to best configure groups of school councils in large jurisdictions as networks of school councils. Not only did the groups need to be small enough in size to enable a dialogue, the school councils that made up each group also needed to have enough in common with each other that the participants would have something to talk about. What was unclear was how to best organize school council networks in ways that would enable them to build relationships based on common interests and concerns. Should the networks link school councils together on the basis of school proximity to each other as a means to establish a common bond? Should the networks link school councils together in the same way that "feeder schools" were linked to each other in an attempt to build relationships based on continuity as the students moved through the system? Should the networks be organized according to their electoral ward in ways that required accountability of the trustees? Or should the issue at hand determine which school councils would be linked together for a particular meeting? For example if they were considering the issue of education funding they might meet by ward, if they were considering the need for continuity in programming they might meet by feeder schools, or if they were considering the need for a community playground they might meet according to geographic proximity.

Timely Access to Complete and Understandable Information

To be effective participants, the school council representatives needed to have timely access to complete and understandable information. That is to say, the network participants needed to have an enlightened understanding about any issues that were of

interest to them or to their school council [excluding personnel or individual student information.] This meant that information had to be shared openly, willingly, widely, and in a timely manner throughout the jurisdiction. One trustee explained his board's approach to providing this information to the school councils which participated in the network,

> Willingness and openness of the board and central office to be a part of the [Network of School Councils] and share in anything they ask. It's never about no, you shouldn't be asking that. So, . . . trust, integrity, honesty, openness. Everyone that comes there has come with good intentions. They're all supporters of education, want the best possible education and improving networks of communication will ultimately lead to better education.

One administrator described her jurisdiction's approach to providing information to the public,

> We just believe that if public education is public education then the public has a right to know. The only things we will reserve sharing information on are personnel issues, as I've talked before, and if there are some sensitive issues financially where we have to make sure there isn't some way that people can influence, for example, land acquisition or some such thing. We have to be careful on certain issues but other than that we operate as a public institution should. We are open to the public and with all that we do we try to say, "Okay, here it is. We've tried to present it as best we can."

This administrator recalled an example of how freely information was given to the network of school councils,

> We had some accommodation studies done in the district and there were suggestions by an external consultant that certain schools be closed and so on. People were flabbergasted that we would just bring this information to the [network of school councils.] However, our relationship with them was if we saw this as something that was of interest to the system we would bring it to them. At the meeting we brought this to them we had some observers from another jurisdiction and they just couldn't believe that we would be sharing this kind of information.

Disseminating information openly and widely was not only the responsibility of the board and central administration, these networks also needed to share information openly, willingly, and widely throughout the jurisdiction. Accordingly, the minutes or

record of the network meetings were distributed to the school councils, school principals, and trustees who were members of the network–whether or not they attended the network meetings. One parent saw this as a way to ensure that they were perceived as a "non-threatening" group. One principal found this to be a very effective way for him to a get a sense of what was going on at the meetings when he was unable to attend. As well, it was a way for school council members who did not attend the network meetings to validate the perceptions of the school council representative who attended the meetings and reported back to the school council.

In addition to disseminating information openly, willingly, and widely it was also necessary to ensure that the information was disseminated in a timely manner. School councils needed sufficient time to receive the information, communicate the information to the broader school community, receive feedback from the broader school community, and hold a meeting to discuss the information. It was absolutely critical that every one who participated in the network understood that this process took time and that sufficient time was provided to enable the flow of information to work effectively. This process was essential to ensuring that the school council representative expressed the school community's view, and not their personal view, or the view of the few individuals who had formal positions on the school council, at the network meetings.

If sufficient time was not provided for this communication process to occur respondents indicated that the school council would not have sufficient time to develop an informed response. In turn, this could lead to the school council representative expressing a personal view at a network meeting rather than the considered view of the school community. As one parent explained,

> So one of our frustrations was making the board and the administration realize that it didn't do any good to give us information at the last minute and expect a decent response; that they had to be more organized about getting information out to us sooner and recognizing that there was a process to follow . . . . But regardless of how the process worked, there had to be enough time in there to respond effectively. And while some chairs certainly felt comfortable giving their opinions about issues, we didn't want that to be the process.

This need to attend to the communication process in a way that enabled authentic and meaningful participation by the school councils and the broader school community required commitment and scrutiny on the part of all who were involved in these networks. As one chairperson explained,

> We need to make sure that the process is being followed and where it breaks down to address the reasons that it does. So for example, we need to get the information out in a timely manner. We also need to make sure everybody gets it. We need to make sure that at the school level it's disseminated and discussed and so the safeguards, I guess, are making sure not one participant or group of participants in that whole process sabotages the process, either deliberately or inadvertently. We need to make sure that process works and so that requires the scrutiny of everyone . . . and if there is a problem, to be able to deal with that.

In addition to acquiring information in a proactive and timely way it was also necessary to ensure that the information was presented in a way that the public could understand it. One administrator recalled how her jurisdiction attended to this concern:

> In years gone by we have asked the [Network of School Councils] if there is any part of our budget that isn't understandable, to help us make it more understandable. . . . sometimes we get drawn into education type things and we express things the way we normally talk and that isn't exactly the way the public talks and we've asked for that kind of input as well.

These networks were not intended to simply serve as a communication channel. They were also intended to enable the participants to talk to each other about the information that was communicated. In order for the participants to feel safe about participating in these conversations, an environment that was conducive to open and honest dialogue, was necessary.

An Environment Conducive to Dialogue

Public meetings are not typically conducted for the purpose of enabling people to talk to each other frankly, openly, and honestly about issues they want to discuss. However, this is what these networks participants wanted to do. This meant that they had to devise new ways of being and working together. As one parent explained,

> We're not a group that is just sitting around getting a bunch of reports. Rather we're encouraged to bring up issues and to talk about them. That process is what allows us to be a voice and to be effective.

Because these networks were intended to facilitate frank and open discussion amongst the participants, these networks of school councils had to abandon the use of "Robert's Rules of Order." Their use only inhibited, rather than promoted, the dialogue. As one parent explained,

> We've all been meetinged to death, and motioned to death, and this is just a real good sharing of information. We don't have minutes, we keep a record of meeting, which is nice, it's more informal. There's no motions made, it's all consensus.

As a result, these groups needed to be collaborative, as opposed to adversarial, and needed to work towards consensus rather than on the basis of majority rule. The chairperson, instead of controlling the meetings, needed to serve more as a facilitator for the dialogue. One participant described the chairperson's approach:

> That's the way she runs it, very much sort of on a consensus: "Now what would you like to do?" and "Now what do you want to do now?" "Should we do this?" "Should we do that?" As you can see she doesn't direct it.

She described why she preferred this less directed approach,

> It seems to take a lot of the politics out of it and you're not raising your hand to vote and seconding motions and all of this type of thing. It's a group of people talking and working together. . . . you do have to have an agenda and you do have to follow through. But I think it's really important that the tone be light, and that there is humor so that people are comfortable and like to speak out and they don't have to raise their hand and put a motion on the floor. You still have to have your framework of what you're doing, but let's not be too darn formal here. I think some people are intimidated if they have to make motions every time they open their mouth; they're not going to want to because they're not used to making motions and they are uncomfortable with it.

According to the respondents, the key to ensuring that these networks of school councils enabled the network participants to dialogue was to ensure that there was a structured time for sharing information or networking on the agenda of each meeting.

> One of the key areas that was identified when we were going about this policy change and system change to implement the [Network of School

> Councils] was that there was to be time every meeting to allow for networking. With nothing necessarily on the agenda but an opportunity for those school council reps to bring up issues that they hadn't had a chance to communicate–items that they didn't want to put as a specific agenda item–but that they wanted some time to discuss with their fellow school councils reps–a situation that was of concern, or information they wanted to gather for their own school.

This meant that the opportunity for sharing information amongst all of the participants, and not the downloading of information from the board or central administration, had to become the focus of the meeting. One chairperson spoke of the struggle to keep the focus on facilitating networking and the sharing of information, rather than on receiving information from the board of trustees.

> I'm trying to get networking put as the first item on the agenda. . . . before I took over as chair I saw it moving in the other direction. Becoming more an organization that was an extension of the board. It was a trial audience for the board for policy. So they could float trial balloons at this organization and if they didn't get shot down too badly there then maybe it was safe to take it out in the public. I didn't like that. I thought we were missing the most important part and the most important part was simply the communication amongst school councils. And so we've really tried to limit the number of presentations and we've . . . limited . . . the amount of time given to any single presentation made by a trustee or administrative person.

Trustees accommodated the desire of the school council representatives to make networking the primary focus of the meetings. As one trustee explained,

> So we took that advice and we said "Okay" . . . we're not going to go on the agenda, we're not even going to ask unless we really feel it has to go and we'll make sure, like I told our communications officer, networking has to the number one priority because that's what they want. So, don't let the agenda become too full with presentations and also we put in limiting presentations to ten minutes. And when someone has come and asked to present, you can usually tell they've been pretty much told, "ten minutes is all you get" because they're going "I won't be long" and so that's just been on our part responding to what we've heard from them . . . "You guys are dominating our meeting. We didn't come here to listen to so and so speak for half an hour. . . . We want to know that information, give it to us in ten minutes and then we'll talk about it."

In addition to providing a structured opportunities for sharing of information a number of other factors also had to be considered to create a comfortable and safe space for people to talk freely about issues that were of concern to them. First, clear guidelines about which topics were not appropriate for discussion at a public meeting needed to be defined and articulated. As one parent explained,

> It's the same as at a school council meeting, where there's no teacher bashing there's no parent bashing at these meetings. . . . if a parent has a problem with a principal, or a problem with the school, or a teacher, there are different avenues to take rather than discussing these concerns at a public meeting.

One jurisdiction ensured that these boundaries were clearly articulated in the policy enabling the network of school councils,

> We talked to them right off the start that this is not a forum for discussing personnel issues. That's in their policy. That's in our school council policy. . . . if there are some personnel difficulties somewhere in the organization there are specific ways to handle those and it's not through a public forum.

Second, the meetings needed to occur on a regular enough basis so that topics could be explored in depth rather than just being glossed over. This would vary according to the issues with which a jurisdiction was dealing. As one parent explained,

> We became more aware of the fact that if all school councils are brought together three times a year, which is really all it was, that you cannot tackle a huge issue in one, two hour meeting, . . . I think the awareness was always there from the school council people that, if you had a large issue to deal with you couldn't come and say you have two weeks to deal with this, to prepare a final report and then say we've consulted with everybody.

In summary, these networks were implemented as small, loosely knit, democratic, volunteer organizations which were school council owned and controlled. Key to their successful implementation was the wide open and timely dissemination of relevant, understandable information; a climate that was conducive to open and honest dialogue; and the provision of sufficient time at each network meeting for dialogue and networking. In addition, the successful implementation of these networks was dependent upon every one understanding their roles and carrying out their responsibilities.

Necessary Roles and Responsibilities

Because these networks were not intended to be part of the bureaucratic hierarchy or to direct and control the work of the school councils, and because one of the primary purposes of the network was to provide a forum for dialogue, the roles and the responsibilities of the participants in these networks appear to have required a unique conception of how to work together. The relationships amongst the participants were not hierarchical, adversarial, superficial or contrived. Rather, they were collegial, that is, relationships that were based on shared interests and a common purpose: to enhance and improve public education.

The Role of the Network Chairperson

The primary responsibilities of the chairperson were to call the meetings, to set the agendas and to chair the meetings of the network of school councils. However, the role of the chairperson was not simply to attend to these tasks. In addition, the chairperson had to provide the leadership necessary for the network of school councils to enable authentic participation and meaningful involvement. As one administrator explained,

> We've had very strong leadership. I think that's contributed [to its success]. During my time as superintendent there has only been three chairs and they have all been extremely capable, extremely strong people and have provided, I think excellent leadership.

Parents, too, saw the leadership provided by the chairperson to be crucial to the success of the network. As one parent explained,

> I think they have to be very careful as to the leadership in the group, that it's not somebody who is in there for their own gain–trying to make their name known–and that can happen with groups when people lose the focus of why they're there. . . . I think they should be there to see what they can do to make their school better for their kids. . . . I think that's why we all got into this, or I know I got into it, because of my concern for what was happening in the school and it was my kids. And I don't think we should ever lose that focus. I would hate to see any group that's involved with school councils lose that focus . . . for everyone's kids.

The chairperson needed to establish a climate of openness and trust amongst all the various participants. These were seen to be essential to enabling a dialogue to occur. If participants did not feel safe they were not likely to participate openly and honestly in the discussion. "If you had the wrong person up there it could be awful."

Key strategies that the chairpersons used in order to create a climate conducive for dialogue included enforcing the boundaries of agreed upon topics for discussion, focusing the dialogue on what was best for all students in the jurisdiction, and to be a good listener. As one principal explained, "If somebody is listening to you, boy it sure makes a big difference. And our chairperson does that really well."

The Role of the School Council Representatives

The primary role of the school council representative was to serve as a communication channel between the school council and the network of school councils. One network very clearly spelled out the role of the school council representatives,

> To be open, honest, collaborative with all education stakeholders. This is not a forum for complaining but rather an opportunity to assist each other by sharing information for the betterment of the students in the classroom!

The school council representatives were supposed to convey the issues, concerns, and views of the school council, not their own personal views, at the network meetings and were supposed to report to the school council about the discussion that took place at the network meetings. The degree to which this intended role was fulfilled varied from school to school and seemed to be dependent upon the understanding of the school council representative as to their role. One parent was very clear about her role,

> It's a regular agenda item at our school council meeting, and at that time we talk about what the [Network of School Councils] is doing and any topics that came up that they need feedback on, we discuss at that time. And then I take it back [to the next network meeting].

> I always have to make sure I am not there representing myself. I am there representing my school council, and from the discussions we have at our meetings I get a pretty good idea of where they stand on different issues, what their feelings are.

Another parent was not as confident that this role was fully understood by all of the school council representatives,

> I guess the model is really set up so that the representative of a school council who attends the[Network of School Councils'] meeting will then go back to their school council at the next meeting and make a report on what's going on within the system. I don't know how much that actually occurs. I know on our own school council, we have a few people on there who get quite upset if we spend too much time talking about what's going on system wide, rather than what's going on at the local level in the school itself. But that's just a quirk of this particular year of school council. It wasn't the case in previous years.

Not only did the school council representatives require an understanding of their role, they also had to be willing and informed participants in the discussion. As one parent explained,

> It's one of those situations where you get out of it as much as you put in. If you go and sit there and don't speak up or haven't thought about the issues or don't inform yourself about the issues, you're not going to get a lot out of it.

As well, the school council representatives needed to have a clear understanding that their role was to focus on the common good of all of the students in the jurisdiction rather than simply focusing solely on the needs of their own children or the needs of the school they represented. As one parent explained,

> I do think people need to come to it without their own personal agendas. They need to come with a broad view of education. They need to be concerned about all the kids in the district. And that's very difficult to achieve. I think that partly comes with maturity and it partly comes just with looking at the world in a broader view than me and mine.

The Role of the Trustee

It appears that the primary role of the trustee was to listen, "really listen", to the discussion which occurred during the network of school councils meetings. As one parent explained, "people aren't going to come to a meeting where they don't feel valued, where they're not listened to." Another parent described the trustees' role in this way:

> This is not just a public relations exercise by any stretch. They are listening, they do come away with ideas for policies and changes and they

> react to what we say. . . . they're open to what we're saying and they want the dialogue to occur.

One trustee described the role this way:

> We make a point of ensuring that we don't dominate their meeting. We're generally there as observers. We don't control the conversation–so the parents are talking to parents. And I think that's important because if the parents are just coming to listen to the trustees, that is not the purpose of the [Network of School Councils.] Same with staff. If they are asked to do a presentation, we talk about your time limit is ten minutes not an hour, so you don't take over the meeting. . . . We talk about our role, so there's that understanding that our role is not to run their meetings. It's not to over power, it's not to take over, it's not to try and lobby them. That's not why we're there. We're there to hear, not teach, or lobby, I guess, is the political word.

In addition to not dominating the meeting, it was also important that trustees not take a "great deal of offense" if a parent raised their voice and said, "I think this is a silly idea." As one trustee explained,

> You have to go there with the right agenda. You can't go there with the intent that "Oh, this is going to be my little [Network of School Councils]and I'm going to get it to run the way I want it." You can't do that. You have to go there with "I'm going to hear whatever it is they've decided to tell me." And you have to accept that, because you can go there and hear things you weren't really hoping to hear such as "You know that thing you just did–I think it was awful– and here's why." You have to be prepared to hear that. But in an elected position and as the senior administrator you better be prepared to hear that at any time–that's part of your job. And if you're not willing to hear that, you're in the wrong job. So you have to go with the idea that that's okay and you need to accept that it's going to take a while to develop that culture and that honesty and understanding.

While the key role of the trustee was to listen to the discussion and in doing so gather information to inform the decision making processes of the board of trustees, it was not the only role. Not only were they there to gather information, they also had to respond to the input they received. As one parent pointed out,

> The response is crucial. You know, there's a strong sense at our school that our district is not responsive to parents' needs and a standing joke among the parents is if you phone our district and identify yourself as a parent . . . then you're just kind of lobbed off into space somewhere.

Being responsive did not mean that the trustees had to act on the advice provided by the network of school councils, but if they chose not to accept the advice they certainly had to be prepared to justify their decision. One trustee described this consultative process,

> So we try to concentrate on presenting the facts. We'll tell them, on this issue . . . this is the board's position and here's why we've reached that position. Now ninety-nine percent of the time the school councils accept and take that same position forward. . . . Generally, because we've developed our position by trustees consulting with the school councils, it stands to reason that our position would represent what they wanted to hear.

In addition, the trustees also acted as a resource, provided information to the school council representatives, served as a liaison between the school councils and the board and central administration, and generally facilitated the flow of information between and amongst the school councils and the school board. One trustee described how the trustees acted as a resource,

> Our role has been mostly facilitating, bringing information . . . not facilitating the meetings–we don't run the meetings, but facilitating information flow. So, anything they ask for we will provide that information, if we have it, on the spot. If not, we'll get it to them or bring it to the next meeting. So, we're basically there as a resource for them . . . . However, we will also bring information to the [network of school councils.] For example, I do a board update at each [network of school councils'] meeting, where I provide them with information about board activities and identify some of the major issues. If there is something of major importance we flag it at our board table and will specifically make a point of talking to the [Network of School Councils] about the issue. This gives us an opportunity to get a cross-jurisdictional perspective on the issue. The [Network of School Councils] is a very good forum for that. So we will often flag something to ask if we can put it on the [Network of School Councils'] agenda, that is, we ask the chair if we can have the item added to the agenda.

The Role of the Superintendent

The primary role of the superintendent was to establish the expectation that involvement was important. When the superintendent was required by policy to serve as a liaison with the network of school councils, parent involvement was perceived to be a

valued and an important part of the way the jurisdiction conducted its affairs. However, it was essential that the school councils could make their own determination about whether, how, and when they wished to participate in the network. That is to say participation in these networks of school councils could not be mandated or required. As one administrator explained,

> Because we've gone through regionalization it's been necessary for us to review and amalgamate an inordinate number of policies that people have to respond to because we've had to create a single policy for the policies that existed in three districts before. So it's been important for us to review every policy over the course of the last three years and that's been an onerous task. And because of our belief that people need to be involved, we have reflected those policies back to every group. Now we have said, you know, this is your opportunity for input. If you decide not to take advantage of that opportunity, that's perfectly okay. We understand that you have a lot of things to do–a lot of important things to do–and we don't want to press. This does not have to become your agenda just because it's our agenda. And I think so long as we do that with everything . . . we give people the opportunity to be involved to the level that they want to be involved. We don't dictate involvement. Just like you can't demand volunteerism.

The Role of Central Office

One of these networks of school councils had significant organizational and secretarial support from the communications people in central office. This included distributing the agenda to the superintendent, the trustees, and the school council representatives after it was prepared in consultation with the chair of the network of school councils. This did not mean that the communications staff prepared the agenda, that was the responsibility of the chair of the network. However, they would provide the secretarial help to have it typed up and distributed. They would also distribute copies of the minutes which were taken by the secretary of the network of school councils. Again, they did not take or write these minutes–but would provide the secretarial help needed to get them typed up and sent out. Getting the minutes to the school council representative was often challenging. This jurisdiction found that the most reliable method of distributing this information was through the mail–rather than relying on "pupil post." As one parent explained,

> We've sort of gone back and forth between using the courier system within the school district and mail. We're leaning more towards doing it through mail because it's a little bit more reliable that you're going to get it. Sometimes, you know, kids maybe aren't as responsible in getting the thing home or the person who receives the mail in the school doesn't know who you are. So it's been kind of inconsistent coming through the schools.

In this jurisdiction, central office personnel worked closely with the chairperson of the network of school councils to ensure that any requests for information or for additions to the agenda were communicated to the chairperson. In addition, they made all of the necessary arrangements for the meeting such as booking and setting up the room, providing coffee, audio visual aids and so forth.

In another jurisdiction, the network of school councils did not receive this kind of support from central office, in part, because they did not want it. They did not want central office support because they were afraid that they could lose control of the agenda if central office was involved. These duties were assumed by the chairperson of the network of school councils. As one participant explained,

> I think that our strength is that it is parent volunteers. . . and I really like that. I don't want to sound negative but, let's not start involving downtown. Downtown is very political. . . . the politics get in the way of what we're doing with the kids. I think it's better to keep downtown out of it.

In both jurisdictions central office staff would provide resource personnel to attend the network meetings to answer questions on specific issues when they were asked to do so.

In conclusion, a key point which has to be made regarding the conditions needed to sustain these networks of school councils, is that, while these structures, processes, roles, and responsibilities were certainly perceived to be necessary for their successful implementation, they were not viewed as sufficient to enable the networks of school councils to fulfill the intended goals. The respondents were very clear that these networks of school councils could not be effectively implemented and sustained unless a collaborative culture–which was inclusive of the parents and the school councils–was embedded throughout the jurisdiction.

What Sustained These Networks of School Councils?

Participants pointed out that you could have the right structure, consistently use good process, and have a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities, yet, the network of school councils would still not fully succeed in enabling meaningful involvement and authentic participation. Ultimately, the success of the network was dependent upon the culture of the school jurisdiction. Unless a commitment to parental involvement and citizen participation in public education and a willingness to make the networks work was embedded throughout the school jurisdiction; and unless the necessary resources and support were provided, the network of school councils could not attain it's full potential. As one parent explained,

> I think you certainly have to have the cooperation and the buy in of administration and the school board. I think that's critical. You don't have to, as a parents' group, have to have their permission to form–that's not what I'm trying to say. But you have to have all of the parties in the process buy into the process itself or I think your doomed to failure. So, along with having a structure and having a meeting, setting your agenda and all the rest of it, you have to have the willingness to work together by all parties, or I think you're doomed to fail.

A Belief in Citizen Participation in Public Education

An essential condition, necessary for the successful implementation of these networks, was a commitment to parental involvement and a belief in the value of citizen participation in public education by parents, elected representatives and professionals alike. One trustee described this commitment as needing to be part of the "corporate culture,"

> So, it has to be part of the corporate culture, it has to be embedded in the entire organization, it can't just happen at one level and not be the case at all other levels. So what I'm suggesting to you, is it probably has to start at the board level and they have to be open to a dialogue process. So if they're stuck in the mode of Robert's Rules of Order . . . here's the process and here's the procedures and there are never any open forums where you simply brainstorm, you dialogue, and through a process of courtesy and respect you enable all points of view to come forward, you entertain diversity of opinion and allow it, in fact encourage it, in order to look for the best processes to achieve effectiveness and efficiency, then indeed it won't occur at the system wide level, it won't occur with your administration, it won't occur with your networks of school councils, and

> it certainly won't occur at the individual school council. There will be all this formality and stringency and constraint and boxes. I fail to see how education can move forward and really benefit children, adults, and society generally with those kind of constraints built in. So when I talk corporate culture I mean all the way through.

As one administrator explained,

> First of all, you have to believe in citizen participation. I don't think it can be contrived. I think you either believe that it's good to have people involved or you don't believe that. And if you believe that it's good to have people involved then you will do things to support their involvement. That is to say, there will never be any undermining of what they want to achieve and their motives won't be questioned. Relationships and trust will be built up.

As well as valuing authentic citizen participation, the board of trustees and the professionals at both the jurisdiction and school level had to believe that meaningful parental involvement would benefit the public education system. As one parent explained, in order for the network of school councils to achieve its intended purpose it was necessary "that the school board members themselves feel that it is important." This meant that central administration and the board of trustees had to sincerely believe that involving the parents and the school councils made a positive contribution to the system.

If this commitment was absent parents could attempt to increase the awareness of the central administration and the board of trustees that parents wanted to be more involved. One network chairperson recounted how they did this:

> I felt that we needed to do some educating in this district by making administration and trustees aware that we felt we had a role. That we could play a positive one. To have them recognize that we wanted to be involved and we saw that as being a positive thing.

At times simply increasing awareness did not lead to increased involvement, and the parents had to take a more direct approach. As one parent explained,

> There has to become a feeling within the school, that parents are valued members of this school community, that they have things to contribute. That has to come from the top–or–maybe it just has to come from some of us who won't butt out, who won't back off, who want to be here. We have a right to be here, it's our children. We're not a threat, we're here to support, you know.

Another parent described how this occurred in her jurisdiction, "I think they saw that we were resolved to do it and that it would probably be very difficult to then stand up and say, "No we don't think that's a good idea.""

The respondents in this study were very clear that networks of school councils could not enable authentic participation and meaningful involvement throughout the jurisdiction unless a commitment to public participation in public education was held by all members of the school community–parents, teachers, principals, trustees, central office, and school administrators. However, not only was it necessary to hold this belief, everyone also had to be willing to put in the time and effort needed to "make it work."

A Willingness to Make it Work

Authentic participation and meaningful involvement do not "just" happen–people have to be willing to make it happen. As one parent explained, the key to ensuring that the network was successful was the jurisdiction's willingness to make it work.

> You need to have the will and again, [our jurisdiction] has always been open, and that is why the[Network of School Councils] is effective and that's almost more important than any dialogue that goes on–clearly there's a willingness and it shows a willingness to be open, and that's what needs to be in place. More than any other structure or way of doing it or anything of that nature, the willingness to make it an effective dialogue is what needs to be in place.

Extra time and effort was required of all those who had a role to play in these networks to ensure that the dialogue was effective. One administrator described it this way:

> Extra meetings, extra communication. . . . As a superintendent I have to make sure that my principals know what's being discussed at the [Network of School Councils] . . . nobody wants to be blind sided by anything–so I don't want my principals coming one morning and accosted by someone who attended a [Network of School Councils] meeting and said, "Now, you know, this is what the superintendent said now you better get onto this right away." I have to make sure that doesn't occur. That's part of my job–to communicate properly. So . . . it does make for extra communication. It does make for extra meeting time. It does make for extra preparation time. So, there are those extras. And that's why you have to believe in public involvement in order to do it. . . . it does take more time than if we didn't have one.

Not only does central administration have to be willing to make it work, the board of trustees, as well as the school councils, have to believe in the concept. As one trustee explained,

> I think there is a huge risk, with the way it's structured and unless there's good will on the part of the board and on the part of the school councils it is too easy to fall into adversarial roles. And by that I mean you go backwards rather than going forwards and essentially the [Network of School Councils] simply becomes another constituent with a complaint.

Parents, too, have to be willing to do their part if these networks of school councils were to succeed. One parent described how the parents who participated in the network of school councils helped to make it work,

> They're just nice people, they're good people . . . we all have the same purpose–and that is to make the school a better place for our kids. So we're all focused on this one thing. You know, I haven't seen anybody there who's there for their own personal whatever. They're all so willing to co-operate and so willing to share and give ideas as to what's working in their school, and ask for help for what's not.

In addition to be willing to put in the time and effort to make it work, parents also had to be provided with genuine opportunities to do "meaningful work." As one parent explained,

> I think you also have to do meaningful work so people will be willing to come to another meeting. They have to see that the work they do there has value; measurable concrete value. For example, you submit a report and it's acted on, or you give ideas and recommendations and they're acted on. You share information and somebody uses it at their school to help them.

A common concern, expressed by several participants, was whether or not parents actually wanted to be more meaningfully involved or were willing or able to put in the time and effort required to be more meaningfully involved. One parent talked about a concern she had about how few parents wanted to have more involvement in their children's education.

> I would say in our school council, there are maybe three or four of us that wish things were different and that see a different role [for parents and for school councils]. But I would say the other thirteen or fourteen regular people are just happy with the status quo with deciding about the hot-dogs.

Another concern was many parents no longer wanted to do "meaningless" tasks but were not willing to put in the time and effort to make the necessary changes so that their involvement could be more meaningful.

> The other dozen people that I have seen come and go over the years just don't want to do that old stuff and yet they don't or aren't willing to put in the same time and energy it takes to effect change. They will either just say, "Ah, we'll go to a charter school," or "We'll go to a private school," or " I care about my kid, I'll get my kid a private tutor," or "I'll get my kid in special classes here." I'm thinking of a couple of people in particular that I thought would be really keen in trying to help get the [Network of School Councils] up and going but their attitude is basically, "Well, I've only got so much energy and I'm going to focus on my kid."

Another concern was the amount of time parents actually had to be more involved in the education of their children and to participate as an active member of a school council and to also participate in the network of school councils. As one parent explained,

> Sometimes people are afraid of the responsibility and the time commitment. . . . So you have to have someone willing to give up the time. And probably that is the biggest challenge because people are so busy. There's a lot more two income families. There's a lot more stress on the family today than there was in the past and I think parents have probably less time than they have in the past. So then whatever time they put in, let's make it effective and worthwhile.

Another parent also felt that time was a concern,

> I think time commitment is one for sure. Just because, we're so busy with soccer and music and just plain family time. Some nights when I'm going out to a meeting I'm thinking, "I would be better off to stay home and read to my children for two hours because even though I'm doing this for them, that means I'm not there for them in the evenings." So, it needs to be time spent wisely. And it can be really hard to do that especially at first, while we are struggling to find the way we should be moving, the way we should be structured. So I think there needs to be great sensitivity to the time commitment that is expected of this.

One administrator felt that lack of time was such an issue for families that it would be unlikely that the network of school councils would ever succeed,

> We don't have . . . active parent networks at the time[throughout the jurisdiction], and I don't think we ever will. . . . At the January meeting one woman who was representing the . . .[her school]. . . her concern was even within the local school trying to get parental involvement because of

> language problems. Work issues were some of the reasons. Lots of parents are holding down two jobs to make ends meet, baby-sitting problems and of course in some instances, absolute lack of interest in terms of what their children are doing.

Lack of time was a particular concern with respect to finding a chairperson for the network of school councils which did not have secretarial support supplied by central administration. As one network chairperson explained,

> So a concern I have is that there needs to be a commitment of time and energy for somebody to make up the agendas, fax them out, send the meeting notes, arrange for the space.

This chairperson went on to explain that a tremendous amount of time was also required to adequately "search out the information" that was needed to inform the discussions which took place at the networks meetings. She was concerned that parents shied away from taking on a leadership role in this network because of the excessive amount of time and commitment that was required to do a good job. Respondents from both jurisdictions pointed out that networks of school councils not only required commitment, time and effort, but also required resources and support if they were to work effectively.

The Necessary Resources and Support

The financial resources needed to enable effective networks of school councils were minimal. The jurisdiction which had policy in place to enable the network assigned a staff person to assist with communications and covered the cost of photocopying and mailing out of meeting notices and minutes. One trustee describe how little it cost to operate this network of school councils.

> I mean we run very cheaply. The administration commits some human resources time with their communications officer and we use the mail system that's already in place to communicate with the schools, and certainly there's photocopying and postage but the whole organization does not take much to run.

The network of school councils which was a grass-roots initiative did not receive any human or financial support, from the jurisdiction, to enable its operation. It cost this

network about $90.00 per year to operate and this cost was covered by the school councils. However, this network relied extensively on volunteer parents to compile and mail out the agendas and minutes as well as to organize and set up the meetings. This extensive reliance on volunteers was seen as a barrier to the effective implementation of similar networks throughout the jurisdiction. As one parent explained,

> I certainly think that the other [groups of school councils] that I've talked to, and I've gone out and spoken to two or three of them who have said "Gee we want to do this" but what they lack is the one person who says, "Okay. I will schedule the meeting. I will write the agenda. I will do this." . . . what would be ideal is if the district had one position, even a point five position, that was responsible for coordinating the work, the clerical, the secretarial, the distribution,[of agendas and minutes].

One administrator agreed that central office support to assist in the development of networks of school councils was desirable–but also indicated that they lacked the resources to put such support in place.

> So administratively it would be ideal for us to even facilitate getting these groups together the first time or two. Clearly letting them know that we are there as a resource and we could come out to meetings, etc. . . . If we said, "Yes that's what we wanted to do," my next question is going to be, "And who is going to do that?" Because right now, the way education is funded as a whole . . . the restrictions of Alberta Education in terms of a four percent envelope for administrative responsibilities . . . we're really constrained in lots of ways. Then I would say, "If its comes out of administration, it means something we're already doing is going to have to be foregone in order to do more work with this." That might be our best investment of our resources. At the same time, to get over that hump and work in a more proactive way, sometimes you need additional resources even in the short term.

Another administrator felt that if you believed in public participation in education then you would ensure that the network of school councils had the necessary resources and support to function effectively. This, he maintained, was not only restricted to financial and human resources but also included moral support from the trustees and central administration.

> If you believe that it's good to have people involved than you will do things to support their involvement. That is to say there will never be any undermining of what they want to achieve, their motives won't be questioned, relationships and trust will be built up. . . . It's hard to just sit

> down and say you're going to provide this kind of support . . . whatever it is. The support I think has to be a more informal support.

One trustee concurred, and suggested that to be successful the network of school councils needed "support," "encouragement," "facilitation" and "feedback" in addition to the central office support.

When the support of the board of trustees and central administration was lacking it was much more difficult for the networks of school councils to succeed at enabling meaningful involvement. As one parent explained,

> One of the original hopes and intents was that if the district had an issue they were dealing with that they would come to the [Network of School Councils]and they would say "Here, we need your input." And to me it's just common sense. These are your constituents, why wouldn't you want to try? Number one, you'd get political support for your own self and number two, you'd be true to your job. So certainly, a lack of interest on the part of trustees is a real negative.

Parents also expressed concern that if support was provided that it be genuine and not just "lip service."

> I would be concerned that school districts use it as a window dressing and it's not really a give and take situation. For example, the way many junior and senior high schools' school councils are right now–the school reports [to the school council] but they are not really looking for input. So I could see some school board doing the same sort of thing especially after comments that people from around the province have made to me at[provincial school council] meetings. Some school boards could say, "Oh, we've got a committee of school councils. We're great." But if its not used effectively, it's a waste of time.

In addition to support from central administration and the trustees, support from the school principals was also viewed as essential if these networks of school councils were to provide genuine opportunities for parents and school councils to be meaningfully involved in the education system. One principal, who was actively involved in supporting the establishment of a network, described his role in this way:

> I'm more concerned with what they're [the parents] concerned about. I see myself most times as a supporter, a person that can give a different perspective, a person that might be able to answer some of their questions because of my knowledge of what we're doing here and in the system. . . . I see myself as kind of supporting what they're doing.

However, such support was not always forthcoming from the school principals. When asked what kind of support would assist the network in being more effective, one chairperson replied that in addition to financial support, clerical support, and support from the trustees, that she would like to see more support from school principals.

> I would want more of a commitment from principals to encourage their school council's involvement because I know a couple of our school councils are not involved simply because the principal's influence has told them they shouldn't bother. So I think principal support would help people to see that there's value because there is still that natural "well if the principal says it"–and that's both good and bad.

One trustee explained why principal support was necessary,

> We still have that problem even at various sites where individual principals don't encourage that [involvement] even at the school site itself. So if they don't encourage it at a school level then how can it happen in a [Network of School Councils].That person [the school council representative] is being boxed in right at the site. They won't be encouraged, supported, or allowed, not that they need permission, but they will certainly be discouraged and they will begin to be isolated.

One parent, who had organized a network of school councils in his area, attested to this by describing how extremely difficult it was to get the network established because they did not have the support of their own school's principal.

> When we were trying to get our [Network of School Councils] going not only did our principal tell us we couldn't use the school but she made it very plain that she didn't think it was a very good idea . . . and the sense I had from our principal is that there was no need for it. That we had the council meetings at the school level and the [district umbrella] school council meetings and so there's no need to have this intermediary group.

In spite of the resistance from this particular principal these parents were able to establish a network of school councils in their area. In the end though, this network had considerable difficulty in sustaining its activity and only operated for one school year.

> At the end of last year [another parent] and I tried to get a [Network of School Councils] going. . . . We struggled finding a venue because our principal would not let us have the network meetings at our school. She said, . . . there is no care-taking staff in the school after 7:00 p.m. because it's a small school so that there would be a charge. She was very quick to emphasize it would not be charged to our school but a district charge so that our school district would have to pay a caretaker to lock up the school

> and pay for overtime. The message we got from that was that she was not interested in attending the [network of school council's] meetings if we were to hold some at our school-and so we didn't. [Other schools] in our area were happy to host them. . . . I think we had a four meetings last year.

Finally, an additional form of support that was perceived to be necessary was the provision of professional development for parents. One chairperson explained how this could be helpful,

> I think sometimes if you're not used to being in a public setting and speaking in a public setting that it is difficult to do. So we need to encourage people to develop those skills and to become more comfortable. So I think we have to go out of our way to be accommodating and facilitating to that process . . . I see this as a job that the [Network of School Councils] could do for example, but I wouldn't rule out support from administration for doing that. Maybe they've got a resource person who can come and teach communication strategies or conflict resolution problems or all of those sorts of things that get in the way of effective communication.

However, this chairperson was quick to point out that many of the skills and capacities to participate effectively in these networks were already present in our communities.

> I don't think we come close to tapping the resources in the community, with respect to leadership and conflict management and all of the rest of those things. Parents, community members do that all the time in a variety of ways–whether it's their specific job, or whether they are doing it in some other capacity. I think there's a terrific untapped resource out there that we're under utilizing.

One administrator agreed that people in the community had much to offer and that all the district had to do was provide them the opportunity to use their skills and talents for the betterment of the school district. "I like to think that just the way we operate allows people to use the leadership talents that they already have. We have not sent these people to any specific leadership workshops."

It appears, then, that unless you have a commitment to public participation embedded throughout the jurisdiction, the willingness to make them work, and have provided the necessary financial and human resources and support, it is unlikely that these networks of school councils will fully succeed in achieving their intended goals. In

addition, those who do not have a formal role as an employee or as a trustee also have to perceive that they have an important role to play. For example, one network had the full philosophical support of central administration and the board of trustees because of a formal policy enabling the network of school councils, and had provided the necessary financial and human resources to remove the operational burden from volunteers. Yet, the network still had to work at sustaining the participation of the parents.

Getting the majority of school council representatives to attend on a regular basis had become a particular challenge for this network. Participants pointed to the need to ensure that the meetings were well publicized, did not conflict with school council meetings, were of interest to the majority of the participants, and were perceived to be an effective use of time. This issue was raised at one on the network meetings. One parent had this to say about the drop in attendance at the network meetings:

> The concern that I have, and that has been expressed at the [Network of School Councils] at the last two meetings that we've had this school year, is that our numbers are way down. We've not had representation from every school . . . so there is some concern in how are we going to get people out; and is the [Network of School Councils] actually meeting the needs of people; and what do we need to do. So our chairperson took us through a process last time to try and decide where do we go from here. Do we continue to meet? Do we need to cut down on the numbers of meetings? Do we need to be doing something else in order to draw people back in?. . . Is it that there is just apathy, there's no hot issue to be able to come out for? Are people tired? Is it timing of the meetings, or is it something we need to be doing differently?. . . I think it's probably a combination of things. I think that there really has not been hot issues. If you look at school trustee elections in the whole region . . . there was only an election in one community–all the rest were acclaimed. So I think that people just are feeling that everything is going okay and if nobody is rocking the boat then nobody really feels that they need to come and start paddling.

One trustee and one parent from this network reported that, when the issue of attendance was raised at one of the network of school councils' meetings, the group reaffirmed their desire to participate in the network and identified organizational factors, rather than a lack of commitment and lack of time, as the reason for the drop in

attendance. The trustee described the outcome of the meeting where this concern was discussed.

> At the last [Network of School Councils] meeting they discussed the value of continuing with the network. It was unanimous about the value and they talked about ways to improve attendance (September and October were down in attendance). The greatest value they talked about was face to face interaction with the board and central office. They appreciated hearing information first hand: " You can not get information/interaction like this any where except through the [network of school councils.]"
>
> They decided to set the dates for the year and have the chair send a personal letter to each school council asking them to attend as well as send the minutes. They also brainstormed topics they would like to have presentations on, for example, safe and caring schools, technology update, new math curriculum, etc. and scheduled them for the year. As a result, the November meeting had approximately 25 people in attendance. As well I finally got 2 parents from . . . to go, and one of the parents now says she is hooked and it is so good she is going to go all the time.

Continuity of memberships was also a concern. Because the people who serve on school councils can change on a yearly basis, maintaining continuity of membership or, at the very least, ensuring that all school councils understood the role of the network of school councils and understood how their school council could benefit from participation in the network was a particular challenge for the network chairpersons. As one chairperson explained,

> We have to consciously invite school councils or representatives from all the school councils to these meetings. . . . Unless somebody formally invites them and explains why they should attend this thing they won't be there.

In addition, a number of participants stressed the importance of avoiding information overload at the network meetings. One parent expressed it this way,

> We used to be inundated with policy from the board. It seemed when I was chair, every week you ended up with this three page document stating the latest policy and asking for feedback and comments. The message that went back to the board was, unless this is really important, please don't send it out to this school. We're just recycling this paper, nobody's reading it. If you've got something you really want feedback on by all means send it out. But if you send this out every week then it's like crying wolf all the time. Pretty soon people ignore it all.

So it seems that even when the jurisdiction is a strong advocate and supporter of these networks, parents continually have to be invited, encouraged, and enabled to attend and participate. And when you don't have this kind of support, sustaining these networks of school councils becomes an enormous challenge. One participant, from a jurisdiction which did not have policy to enable the networks of school councils, described how they were only able to keep the network operating for one year because of the resistance they encountered from their principal and from their trustee. In the end they simply did not think the network was worth the emotional energy it took to keep going–even though the school councils found the network helpful.

Another network, which also did not have policy in place to support its existence, has been meeting for four years, but their continued functioning can be attributed to the participants' tenacity, the strong support of one of their trustees and the active support and participation of several of the school principals whose school councils participated in the network.

In the district where the network of school councils was enabled by policy there were no concerns expressed about the power and authority of the network or the legitimacy of the school councils to be involved in jurisdictional issues. However, in the jurisdiction where the networks of school councils were not enabled by policy, concern was expressed about the legitimacy of these networks. One participant, from this jurisdiction, questioned how effective these networks could be if they were simply grass-roots initiatives operating in some, not all, areas of the jurisdiction.

> Well I think . . . it's not just going to happen necessarily by chance. It's not necessarily a natural thing. There has to be some conscious decisions with the parents and with the administration and the trustees of a jurisdiction in terms of weighing the value and in terms of the return for the investment.

In addition, he questioned whether or not school councils had a legitimate role to play at the district level,

> I really believe that the biggest role of school councils is at their own individual schools. . . . if the schools are going to be meeting the needs of the kids that are there, we need to have parental input, but again, at the school level. And we talk about one school being different from another, then obviously the parents from one school to the other are going to be different. This is the policy end . . . and that policy is at the really broad

> level for the whole district. So, there is a role but I think their main role is at the school.

As well, this participant questioned the accountability and representativeness of the school council representatives who participated in the network.

> I would like to draw a parallel to the trustees and I know that there are concerns with how representative seven people can be of a very large group. But there is an official accountability when they go to the polls. Now, there is no official accountability at some of these other levels, and I think if you start giving a lot of decision making and a lot of authority to groups that have no accountability that can be very problematic. And I'm not just talking about this, I see this in our province a lot as with the philosophy of decentralization and getting the decision making as close to the people as possible, that sounds good, but if it doesn't work, where does that leave you?

As well, he expressed concern that some school council representatives may not be clear that the role of school councils is an advisory role and not a decision making role.

> The name advisory has gone out of school councils but in the legislation their role is clearly advisory. It's advisory to the school and that's their prime purpose and it is also to inform and communicate with the trustees. It is not a decision making body in the big sense–they're going to make decisions about things that they do, etc. I think that there's a lack of clarity on the part of some people and, part of it is, you remember how all of the fanfare that there was about school councils and finally parents would have a voice, etc. Now, that might be true for a minority within this province but I think the majority of school districts. . . had school councils . . . a lot did. So this wasn't something new but because that had been in place and they were advisory and the name was taken out and we had new legislation some people all of a sudden thought this was going to be like a quasi school board, that these school councils are quasi school boards.

Given these concerns, it appears that a number of issues need to be addressed and resolved before networks of school councils can and should be implemented and sustained successfully.

What Were the Benefits of these Networks of School Councils?

According to the respondents, many benefits occurred throughout the jurisdiction, at both the school and board level, through participation in these networks of school

councils. Overall, the respondents reported that the networks of school councils enhanced the participation of parents and school councils in the education of their children and in the public education system as a whole. They did so because they enabled more enlightened, authentic, and effective participation. A number of factors contributed to this enhanced participation.

In addition, these networks created an opportunity for ongoing public dialogue about public education. A number of benefits for the parents, students, trustees, professionals and for the jurisdiction as a whole were perceived to accrue by regularly bringing parents, trustees, school based administrators, and central office administrators together to talk to each other.

Enabled More Enlightened, Authentic and Effective Participation

The study respondents indicated these networks were beneficial because they enabled informed participation; enhanced participation in the policy making process; fostered personal relationships which engendered trust; enhanced communication between and amongst the school councils, the board of trustees and central administration; engendered a sense of ownership and commitment; validated the legitimacy of parental and school council involvement in the public education system; and increased awareness of how to meaningfully involve parents and school councils in the public education system at both the school and jurisdictional levels.

Enabled Informed Participation

According to the respondents, one of the benefits of these networks was that it enabled parents to be better informed about the public education system which, in turn, enabled them to be more effectively involved. This resulted in a sense of satisfaction about their involvement. As one parent explained,

> I feel a lot more informed as to what is going on. I've always been interested in how political process works and working within the system, how do you effect change . . . it makes me feel like I am having some sort of an impact and some sort of a say on how district decisions are made; being able to get information out to other people in an appropriate way so you don't have people who are . . . complaining about the way something

> is going on. This way they've got the information about why decisions are being made and if there are still concerns, there's that other avenue in order to get the information back to the school board. So there's that sense of satisfaction that you've helped with some of those issues being resolved in an appropriate way.

Another parent pointed out how being better informed enabled parents to participate more effectively.

> I think if you're better informed then you don't go off half cocked. If you have the information in front of you, if you've got a problem, you can make a decision on dealing with the problem based on the way things are, instead of not understanding the system or how things work. . . . I mean, education really is a huge bureaucracy from the school level to the board level to the provincial level and if you don't understand the hierarchy or the funding, even on a really elementary basis, you've got a real problem.

For these respondents, informed participation was key to their meaningful involvement. In particular it enhanced their ability to participate authentically and effectively in the policy making process.

Enhanced Participation in the Policy Making Process

Another benefit of these networks was the provision of genuine opportunities for parents and school councils to participate in the policy making processes of the board of trustees and central administration. Because the process used by these networks to involve parents in discussions about policy and to raise issues and concerns was very transparent, parents viewed this as more authentic. As one parent pointed out,

> Very often school councils can be sort of isolated on their own and it would be very easy for administration within the school . . . for them just to say "Well that concern hasn't been raised at any other school" and just sort of leave it at that and you're left feeling like "Oh, okay well then it just must be this school only." But when you get to raise it in front of other parents who are from other schools, then some of those things can come forward and [people can] say "Yes we discussed that too" or "No, it really hasn't been an issue at our school." . . . so, you know whether you're alone and this is something that just needs to be dealt with at your own particular school level, or if it is something that maybe the district needs to take further.

According to the respondents, this then led to the development of policies that were more responsive and enabling. As one parent explained,

> I think that what it does is it gives parents a way of impacting district decisions. School council really impacts individual school decisions. So yes, I think that it does allow parents to have that impact on very broad policy which in turn ends up determining what kind of school places there can be. . . . So I think this way, there's a lot more chance to affect your school by having some input into the bigger decisions that get made as far as policy directions, strategic direction of the district.

In addition, because the network reflected a diversity of viewpoints, when there was consensus on an issue it was more likely to be considered and responded to by the board of trustees and central administration, than if an individual parent were to act on his/her own. As one trustee pointed out, "we're usually hearing all perspectives. So it will have more influence, shall I say, with the board, because it's been bounced off a whole bunch of people."

This did not mean that these networks of school councils enabled parents and school councils to be involved in the operation or administration of the school system. But it did mean that they could influence the decision making process with respect to philosophies, policies, programs, priorities, and budgets. As one parent explained,

> Well I think you have the opportunity to have input into things that will impact the system, system wide. I think that's very valuable. But again, I don't think anybody wants to be involved in the day-to-day operation or the day-to-day administration of the school system. . . . If it's a burning issue let us deal with it, let us voice our opinions and hopefully a good decision will be taken by the powers that be.

In addition to providing a formal opportunity to inform the policy making process, another benefit of these networks was that they fostered relationships amongst the school councils, the board of trustees, and central administration which, in turn, helped to engender a sense of trust amongst the network participants.

Fostered Personal Relationships which Engendered Trust

Participation in these networks brought people from the school councils, from central administration, and from the board of trustees together on a regular basis. This

regular "face to face contact" enabled these individuals to form relationships with each other which then helped to build understanding and trust amongst the various participants. As one parent stated,

> It's important to me that if I read somebody's name on something or if I need to call somebody or if somebody calls me . . . that I can put a face to that name. . . . it's nice that I know I can phone my school trustee or I can phone . . . an administrator within the school district and I don't have to spell my name. They know who I am . . . . I think it makes a difference that it's face to face. A lot of our communication, . . . is body language and if you can't see how that individual is reacting to either the information that you're giving or whatever– some people just aren't all that vocal. But, if you can look around the room and you can see people nodding, you know that they're in agreement with you, even if they're not willing to speak up or if you can see them and they have a disgusted look on their face but they're not saying anything, you know at least then that you can ask the next question rather than just leaving it where it is.

One parent described how this helped to foster a sense of community amongst the network participants. "I think it's a little more personal. . . . I think what it fosters is sort of that feeling of more small town kind of atmosphere where you feel like you know that person a little bit more." This in turn influenced the way decisions were made.

> I think what happens is there's a lot more consideration for the personal impact–I mean you can make policies if you want and if there's not a face that you're impacting then it doesn't matter so much.

One administrator described the network of school councils as a means of "binding us together" and as a means to strengthen the relationships between the professionals, the parents, and the trustees. This then led to a greater appreciation of the contribution each could make to the public education system. As he explained,

> It really reaffirms the quality and dedication . . . of the parents. We have some really dedicated people who genuinely care about the kids and they're reasonable people and again, it reaffirms that we can work together.

It appears that the personal relationships formed through participation in the network engendered a sense of trust which served to bind the group together. A sense of

trust is integral to effective communication. Accordingly, the respondents reported that another benefit of these networks was enhanced communication.

Enhanced Communication Throughout the Jurisdiction

These networks of school councils enhanced communication between and amongst the school councils, central administration, and the board of trustees. Parents were no longer simply the passive recipients of information. In addition to receiving information from the board of trustees and central administration they could also give information to the board of trustees and central administration. That is to say, the information flow was no longer simply "one-way" from the board and central administrators to the school council representatives. Rather, it became more of a two way process. As one parent explained,

> It's an opportunity for the board of trustees and central administration to speak to a large part of their constituency in terms of things that are going on–and that to me is the biggest thing that the [Network of School Councils]is. However, it is also a two way street because our division is very smart about seeking the input of their parents through the school councils–it's not just a "this is what we're telling you sort of relationship." They will tell us where they are headed on things. They seek input on draft policies, they look for advice on matters that they should take under their belt or not.

This two-way communication was not only valued by parents, it was valued by the trustees as well. As one trustee explained,

> An important feature of it for me was to obtain input as a school board trustee. I think one has to conceptualize here that elected trustees are guests at these meetings. Trustees can function fairly adequately, I suppose, without a lot of dialogue, simply waiting for the phone to ring and complaints to come in. For me that's not the preferred methodology, but that's traditionally, I think, how the system has worked, not only in our division, but virtually all school divisions or jurisdictions.

These networks also enabled parents to have more "direct communication" with the board of trustees and central administration. One network chairperson described it as the "quickest route to the top." He explained why the opportunity to communicate directly with the board of trustees and central administration was important to him:

> I like to take my concerns directly to the person who can do something about them, as opposed to going to a local school council meeting and having a bitch session where I'm unhappy about this–but what do we do about it? Well, now we know what to do about it. We take it to this meeting and find out if it's a problem that's system wide, or if it's just with our school, and then deal with it.

More "direct communication" helped to decrease the "frustration" often felt by parents in working with a large bureaucracy and it helped to "speed up" the time it took to have a problem addressed and resolved. As one parent explained, "you can always find a way to the top. The question is whether you're taking the route around the mountain or straight up the side

Trustees also found this direct communication to be beneficial because, as one trustee explained,

> I get to listen directly to the dialogue and I underline listen because I think that's important. Yes, I share information, but I tend not to participate in the debates that go on there. I try to listen because these are the issues that are important. I, in turn, can go back to the school board and speak with much greater confidence as to, not only the complaints that I get from individual constituents, but again, to those aspirations, and wishes and concerns that are collectively there in the schools in the geographic jurisdiction that I represent.

When the board of trustees and central administration were supportive of the network of school councils information flowed freely between the school councils and the board of trustees and central administration. However, when the support of the board of trustees or central administration was lacking, the effectiveness of the network in enhancing communication was questionable. As one parent explained,

> I think that I would say yes, and a very tentative yes, in that I think some of the information that comes forward and is then taken back to the school would be information that maybe they wouldn't have got otherwise.

In addition to enhancing two-way communication and enabling more direct communication, these networks of school councils were also seen as a very effective way of sharing information amongst the school councils themselves. However, this depended on how active the school council representative was in bringing issues forward to be discussed at the network meeting and how effective the representative was in taking

information back to that school council. Some school councils made sure that a network report was a regular agenda item at their monthly school council meetings. However, this was not always the practice and there was no way of monitoring whether or not the school council representative actually took the information back to the school council.

It appears that these respondents felt that these networks were beneficial because parents and school councils became more active participants in the communication process. This active participation, in part, helped to engender a sense of ownership and commitment towards public education.

Engendered a Sense of Ownership and Commitment

Participation in these networks of school councils was seen as a very effective means to promote collaboration amongst the school councils, the board of trustees, and central administration. This was, in part, based on the genuine opportunities that these networks provided to share information and brainstorm solutions to problems that the individual schools or the jurisdiction as a whole needed to resolve. This process fostered a sense of ownership of the public education system amongst all those who participated in the network. This, in turn, fostered a sense of commitment towards the public education system. One administrator provided a rich description of this process.

> I think it's a well known fact that if you want to have ownership in anything or if you want to build ownership in anything, then the ideas are far more readily accepted if, in fact, individuals bring those ideas themselves. That's true amongst professionals and it's true amongst people who are not, in a particular situation, acting as the professional in that realm. . . . The same thing is true amongst the network of school councils. I mean they are humans as well, and if the superintendent walks in and says, "Now this is how I think you should operate," they're not going to respond very well to that. They're not going to respond very well . . . if the board chair walks in and says "Now we've thought about this and this is the box that we want you to be in." Well most people are . . . going to say, "I don't want to be in this box." But if you throw it out to them and you say "Okay, now we have this idea that we'd like to have a network of school councils and here's some of the things that we think it could achieve for us and here's some things that we think it could achieve for you. We're not hung up on the overall process that we're going to use and we don't even know where we're going to end up completely but we'd like you to give some thought to this." . . . When you do it in that fashion then

> people are going to turn around and they are going to ask you for your opinions. And that's what they'll be–they'll just be your opinions as opposed to your directions. And your opinions are far more acceptable to people than your directions. And you get the same thing accomplished and people sit around and they feel really good. They say, " Well, we did this ourselves."

Thus, it appears that these networks of school councils engendered a collective sense of ownership and commitment towards public education amongst all those who participated in the network. This, in turn, helped to validate the legitimacy of parental and school council participation in deliberations about public education.

Validated the Legitimacy of Involvement

The role that parents and school councils should play in the education system is not clearly defined and is often contested. Participation in these networks of school councils validated that parents had a legitimate role to play in the education of their children. One parent described how participation in the network of school councils affirmed her desire to participate and validated a meaningful role for school councils.

> I feel so much better. . . . I feel that I can see it happening . . . people do have to realize that they do have a voice, and they do have a right to participate in their children's education–I'm seeing that happening. I finally saw somebody bringing it up and quite bluntly saying "We're not getting this in our school you know!" The lady sitting next to me was just amazed at what was happening in some of the other schools. . . . they had had a change in principals, and in the past had been very much controlled by the principal–and it's changing. She said that part of this was knowing what other school councils were doing, and we were able to . . . make them feel that what they were doing was right, and that they were not wrong feeling that they were entitled to a part in their children's education. . . . so I think it's making them feel good too, and that's what we want.

In addition to reaffirming their right to be involved, participation in these school council networks reinforced for parents that they had valuable skills and talents which could help to enrich the education system. As one parent recounted,

> It's made me realize that parents really are quite intelligent, you know. All evidence to the contrary, . . . there's a wealth of knowledge and information out there–and ability. I am continually stunned by how parents come to this education issue process stuff feeling so stupid and inadequate

> and like a bunch of dolts and yet when you then say, "So what do you do as a professional?" it blows you away –the responsibility they have, the jobs they have, the influence they have in their corner of the world and yet they feel totally idiotic at their school. I mean it's just ludicrous.

The presence of the network was a visible demonstration that parents and school councils played a valuable role in the education system and an acknowledgment that parents and school councils had an important contribution to make to the education system. One parent even went so far as to say that the existence of the network was more important than what it actually did.

> I really think that what is important . . . is not so much in what the network of school councils actually does, as what it demonstrates about our school boards and our school councils. Because our school board has put some effort into ensuring that it goes and continues and they attend, it's not like they just put us in a life boat and said, "You take care of yourself, give me a letter once a month," but they attend and are an active part in the discussion that goes on. To me that speaks volumes about the school board and the mind set of the school board and that really to me is more important than what the [Network of School Councils] actually does.

This was particularly true in the jurisdiction where the network was enabled by policy. The networks that were not enabled by policy did not enjoy the same support from the board of trustees and central administration. Nevertheless, they did have considerable support from the administrators and trustee who participated in them.

However, as one parent pointed out, even if the school council role was clarified and validated through participation in the network of school councils this did not necessarily mean that it "always helped them put that into action." Authentic, enlightened, and effective participation of school councils was not viewed as possible unless the school principal was open to and willing to support that involvement at both the school and jurisdictional levels. As one parent commented,

> I went into this thinking the principal is the key to all of this stuff. If the principal wants these things to work, they'll work. And if the principal doesn't, they won't. And I think what I have learned in these three years is that is more true now than ever before.

In other words, while participation in these networks of school councils was seen to be helpful in enabling the meaningful involvement of parents and school councils in

the public education system, particularly at the jurisdictional level, it wasn't perceived to be a "panacea" or "the be all and end all." The presence of the network was not the only factor which determined whether or not parents and school councils would have opportunities for meaningful involvement. Rather, it was seen to be one of many factors that contributed to the ability of parents and school councils to have a meaningful role at both at the school and board level. As one parent explained,

> I don't think the [Network of School Councils] is the be all and end all in terms of getting things done or school council effectiveness, but it's one small tool that I think helps. . . . the other tools are the school council relationship with the parents in the school, the relationship with the principal, the relationship that the school council has with central administration which can be a different relationship than it has with the trustee. So there's a lot of tools that the school council uses.

Another participant pointed out that, because the membership of the school councils and hence that of the network of school councils changed from year to year, it was very hard to assess the effect that the network had on any one school council.

> It's very intangible. It's difficult to pin down what effect this organization has on any individual school council because it changes from year to year depending on who's involved in the school council and whether they are proactive people or whether they are concerned only with things that are going on within their own school.

For these respondents, participation in the network was viewed as one means of enhancing authentic participation and meaningfully involvement, particularly at the jurisdictional level. It was not necessarily thought to enhance participation of parents and school councils at the individual school level, although it was perceived as being able to influence the degree of participation and involvement at the school level by increasing the participants' awareness of the various way parents and school councils could be involved in the endeavors of the public school.

Increased Awareness of the Possibilities for Involvement

Participation in these networks increased awareness of various ways parents and school councils could be more authentically and more meaningfully involved. One parent

maintained that "without this [Network of School Councils] I don't think a lot of us would know what is possible." One parent described how going to a network of school councils meeting enabled her to get a better sense of what parents and school councils could be involved in. "To go to a [Network of School Councils] meeting and see that there are principals who are comfortable with parents and who ask the advice of parents and who share information with parents is . . . just so positive I think."

This increased awareness gave parents some strategies they could use to enhance parental involvement in their individual schools. As one parent recounted,

> It made me realize that it was possible, that people were doing these things, and that there was some genuine stuff happening out there. Also, I think it gave me some tools to say, "Gee, this is how they are doing it– what about if we try this?"

One network chairperson suggested that such tactics weren't necessary if the principal was open to involving parents in the decision making process about education issues. However, "if there was a less than perfect working relationship with the principal and the parents wanted to be actively involved, the [Network of School Councils] could play a role in providing encouragement, information, and an alternative route to that participation."

As well as playing an indirect role, the network of school councils could also address the issue directly by discussing parental and school council involvement at the network meetings. One network chairperson described how a network could deal with these issues directly.

> I think we could deal with that at the [Network of School Councils] meetings . . . not to discuss a specific situation, that would be inappropriate, but to discuss how we feel the role of the principal and school councils should operate.

In other words, involvement in these networks could further a more meaningful role for school councils both at the school level and at the district level when resistance to their involvement was encountered. School council representatives could come to a network meeting to discuss their concerns and, potentially, could get support for the role they wanted to play.

> I think it's made the school council that maybe didn't feel they were getting the response from the administration they felt they deserved–I think it's made them a little more determined to push for it and to say just a minute, "Why aren't we getting this? Why aren't you listening to us, why aren't you sharing with us like some other school councils share with their administration?" . . . it may not be right at a formal meeting, it may be whoever their representatives are going back to another group and saying, "Do you know what's happening?" and "Maybe as a group we should get together and we could push a little harder."

This increased awareness of the possibilities for parental and school council involvement was not always seen as a positive thing by parents. It could lead some parents to become frustrated and discouraged. As one parent lamented,

> Sometimes . . . I wish I never knew any of this stuff because it was better living in my little world thinking this was the way the world operated. And once you see that there are other ways, you never want to go back and when you're forced to go back, it can be even worse than it was before because you don't know what you've got until you don't have it anymore.

In addition to enabling more enlightened, authentic, and effective participation, both at the jurisdictional level and at the school level, these networks also provided systematic and structured opportunities for the network participants to talk to each other about public education. That, is to say, the network created a public space for public dialogue about public education. This, in and of itself, according to the respondents, resulted in many benefits for both the participants and for public education.

Created a Public Space for Public Dialogue about Public Education

These networks provided structured and systematic opportunities for parents, school-based people, central office administrators, and trustees to talk to each other openly and publicly about issues of common concern. According to the respondents, the opportunity to engage all of these people in public conversations about public education enabled the participants to have a broader view and to shift their thinking. As well it fostered shared understanding and mutual respect, enabled mutual learning, and served as a valuable resource and a source of support for the participants. This, then, provided the opportunity for continuous improvement to occur throughout the jurisdiction.

Enabled a Broader View

Participation in these networks enabled the participants to identify those issues which were specific to individual schools and best dealt with at the school level and those issues which were a common concern and best dealt with at the jurisdiction level. As one trustee advised, "it takes the school councils into the bigger picture, so it gets away from just my school and my world." One administrator described the network of school councils as a way to enable the jurisdiction to operate as a "school system as opposed to a system of schools."

Issues that the network participants agreed were issues of common concern could then be dealt with through the development of district wide policies. Issues that the network participants agreed were specific to individual schools, or could best be handled at the school level, could then be dealt with by the school principal, by the school council, or through the development of a school policy. One participant explained why this was significant.

> I think individual school councils are proponents for their individual schools and they need to be. That's why they were established and that's how they should work. However, individual schools sometimes get tied up in knots over some individual policy that may affect them negatively or whatever.

Trustees, in particular, benefited from this opportunity to discern which issues were school specific and which were district issues. This broader view assisted trustees to make decisions in the best interest of all of those in the jurisdiction and not just in the best interest of the "squeaky wheel." If they became aware of an issue that was a concern throughout the jurisdiction they could then go to the board of trustees and say, "This is an issue. How do we make our entire division better with respect to that particular issue?" One trustee explained how the network meetings assisted her to make decisions in the best interest of the common good.

> [The Network of School Councils meetings] are some of our best meetings because you hear so much, learn so much from the parents, and all at one time. . . . So it helps you to make a decision, because you are making a decision for the district, as a trustee. And so it gives that . . . balancing of information.

In addition to informing the decision-making processes of the board of trustees, these networks of school councils provided an opportunity for the board of trustees to justify their decisions to the school councils. This was perceived as one way to prevent the alienation of the school councils who may not have advocated for a particular decision made by the board of trustees. As one trustee explained,

> It may not be what a school council wanted, but . . . they have an understanding of why the decision was made. Whereas, if they only saw it from their perspective without having talked to others to understand that, while this might be the perfect policy for [a school] of five hundred students it really won't work for [a school] of fifty students. So we have to come up with a policy that would be beneficial to both, so balance and understanding is created.

Enabled a Shift in Thinking

The "sharing of information" which took place during the network meetings provided the participants with genuine opportunities to hear a number of different points of view. This, at times, led individual participants to "shift their thinking" about a particular issue. One parent described how this occurred.

> I've seen a lot of people shift their thinking once they hear about the problems, the difficulties, the issues that other schools have. So, from the trustee's point of view I think it would be interesting to see the different viewpoints, but also see what happens when people just sit and talk and can come to some common understandings of things. I think it would make it easier for the trustee.

Another participant recounted how this "shift in thinking" occurred when the network of school councils was asked to consider whether or not there should be a district-wide policy on fundraising:

> It was an excellent discussion and some of them came there with "Yes, . . . we have to set this [district wide policy]." By the time they discussed it as a group they decided, "No, that would be an impossible thing for the board to try to have a policy on and it should remain at the school site."

It appears that participation in these school council networks increased the participants' awareness of the diversity of needs within the school jurisdiction. This recognition helped to foster, amongst the participants, a shared understanding and mutual

respect for each school community's unique needs. As well, it enabled the participants to form a shared understanding of those needs that were common throughout the district.

Fostered Shared Understanding and Mutual Respect

Participants reported that the "biggest positive" of these networks of school councils was a better mutual "understanding" of each other's perspective and a better ability to "put things in perspective." As one parent explained,

> It's been very interesting to me to hear other people's points of view that are not the same as my own . . . and to be able to open my mind enough to hear that my way isn't always the only way and that there are other issues out there, there are other problems at schools with different neighborhoods, different makeups. So, I think it's given me a broader picture than I had before.

One network chairperson described how participation in the network of school councils helped to foster this mutual respect and shared understanding.

> Through the discussions that take place at the meetings you get completely different points of view depending on what part of the system you are in– what level you're at–whether it's junior high, elementary or senior high school. It's a bit of an eye-opener at times. That's the most valuable part.

Another network chairperson expressed the effects of participation in the network of school councils in this way:

> Dramatic. It's made me realize there are different ways to do things. It's made me realize that if enough people start talking to each other and start talking the same language you can effect change. It's made me realize that the problems I have as a school council chair or an active member in my school community are shared by many other people.

One administrator indicated that participation in the network of school councils not only enabled the participants to appreciate the different points of view but had even resulted in some of the participants being able to take one another's views forward at the network meetings.

> The teacher reps talk to the parents at their school council and then when the parents are talking at our [Network of School Councils]get together, some of the parents can speak from a teacher's point of view. "I talked to [our teacher rep] . . . this is what I think the teachers would think." So that

> has to help us a lot because it strengthens the partnership between the parents and the teachers.

Participation in these networks of school councils, through the process of dialogue, provided the various participants with an opportunity to acquire a broader view and to develop a greater appreciation of the issues. This, in turn, often led to a "shift in thinking" amongst the participants which reflected a greater understanding of the diverse needs and interests of all of the children who attended the schools in the jurisdiction. It appears that the systematic and structured opportunities for ongoing dialogue provided by the network of school councils enabled the participants to build collective understanding and shared meaning.

As well, participation in these networks helped parents to understand that decisions made in the jurisdiction "did not just come out of thin air." This enabled greater "buy-in" even from those who did not agree with the decision because, as one parent explained,

> I think because we feel like we're being listened to . . . you recognize that the polices that the board has or the decisions they make aren't coming out of thin air. They are considered, and even when they make a decision that you don't agree with, because it has been a dialogue you have some understanding where they've coming from and you know that they've heard what you've had to say.

One participant expressed the concern that even though participation in the network of school councils could enhance parents' understanding of the diversity of needs throughout the district it was unlikely to change their behavior. That is to say, when push came to shove, the parents would still act in the best interest of their own school rather than in the best interest of the jurisdiction as a whole. As one participant commented, "At the same time, they can all have that understanding but when it comes to their school, then they are saying but that's fine for the rest of them–not for mine."

Enabled Mutual Learning

The opportunity to share information and to network also provided the participants with an opportunity to learn from each other. One administrator pointed out

that people "generally want to do a good job" and could benefit from each other's experience by sharing information with one another about the kinds of activities they have been involved in. Simply by asking "Well what's going on with your group?" they could learn about something that might also be of benefit to them. It meant that each individual participant and each school council did not have to "re-invent the wheel." As one participant explained, "if somebody has done something and it has worked for them it's far easier to transfer that over to your school council than to start it all up from square one." It was particularly important that parents had the opportunity to connect with each other so they could learn from each other. As one administrator explained, "top down doesn't work too much with parents."

Furthermore, respondents felt not only could parents learn from each other, but the public education system as a whole could benefit from the opportunities that these networks provided for mutual learning. As one network chairperson said, "these are very bright people and they have some very good ideas on how things can be done within the system."

However, one participant pointed out this may not always be the case.

> Many of the meetings that groups of school councils are having . . . often times there's no trustee there, there's no district administrator there. So you've got a group of parents. Now, taking the extreme if you had twelve very uninformed parents sitting there informing one another, I'm not sure that they do learn.

In addition to informal learning, these networks of school councils also provided the opportunity for more formal learning. Speakers were often invited to these network meetings to speak on subjects such as developing the district budget or special needs programming. As well, at election time, one network organized a candidates' forum. Another network sponsored school council workshops to assist with such things as how to write school council bylaws, how to conduct effective meetings, how to communicate, and how to get more people involved in a school council.

One participant described how the network, by providing the opportunity for both formal and informal learning, enhanced the school council's effectiveness.

> Everybody, when school councils were first established, seemed to have this great need to get bylaws in place, and that kind of thing, to get the

> formal structure. So what it did was, we had somebody come in, talk to us about this is how you do it, take us through a workshop, then we would go back to our communities. But the other thing this did that was different was we could then say, "Hey you guys already have your bylaws. Can we have a copy?" Instead of starting from scratch on things, there was a lot of sharing of this is how we do our agendas, this is how we get people to meetings. So while the workshops gave us some information, we realized, as we were going to these workshops and just talking to each other informally, that we were already doing a lot of the things. And so that I don't have to reinvent how to do a good agenda–here is somebody who is doing one, send me a copy.

Thus, these networks provided an opportunity to share information and ideas and work collaboratively as a group to problem solve. This, in turn, enhanced the effectiveness of the school council. One parent described this process,

> Say if we're raising an issue, we bring it forward at the [Network of School Councils.] There may be another school that has dealt with a similar problem or maybe even the same problem and then they'll tell you how they dealt with it or how things are handled at their particular school so then those ideas can be brought back to your home school, and you can discuss whether that might work where you are.

In addition to serving as a valuable learning resource these networks also served as a valuable source of encouragement and hope.

Served as a Valuable Source of Encouragement and Hope

These networks of school councils were a means to connect the school council representatives, who were often the school council chairpersons, with each other. It was a very effective way for them to "get some feedback from each other on what was happening in their group." In doing so, the network served as a source of support and encouragement for the school council representatives. One parent recalled how the network had helped one of their school councils.

> One school was really struggling, really, really struggling and the fact that they could come to this [Network of School Councils] and talk about some of the problems they were having, as far as even getting established when they were dealing with an administration that was bucking it, and to know that there was support for them and they could come to this group and vent and say, "It's not working for us, you know." I think the fact that they

could come to these workshops kept them going and gave them some hope that things may change and we have to keep plugging away.

A trustee provided another example.

> The chairperson of a school council has to address a lot of issues that are coming up within the school council itself. It's an ideal opportunity for the school council chairperson to compare the issues that are coming up in an individual school with the issues that are coming up in a collection of schools. And from that point of view they can begin to filter and say, "Okay, this is isolated to my school, I'm going to have to deal with it at that level." But if it's an issue that's common across several schools then I have several other resource people available to me who can say to me, "Here's how we've dealt with it in our school." So in terms of resolving . . . whatever the issues happen to be, there's a cadre, a resource body there available to these people. Whereas, if they function solely in isolation unto themselves in their own schools, they won't have access to some very valuable information. So they don't end up reinventing the wheel in a lot of instances, the exchange of information at their level is important.

Another participant described how the chairperson of the network of school councils could act as a resource for other parents who served on school councils.

> It gives people out there, parents out there, one more individual, one more contact if they're having a problem. . . . you can also communicate with the network chair and say, "We've got a problem here. What are we going to do?" And maybe that's another resource person that can come out and say, "Having a problem?" I've done that with schools in the past. I've met with individual schools, and I've tried to help them sort out how they see their role within the school.

Enabled Continuous Improvement

By bringing people together on a regular basis and by ensuring that ample time was provided for networking and sharing of information these networks of school councils provided an opportunity for issues "to surface." This, in turn, provided the board of trustees an opportunity to determine which issues were of common concern and needed to be addressed throughout the jurisdiction. Otherwise, as one trustee asked, "How does a trustee discern whether an issue is a priority on the basis of one or two phone calls?"

Once the issues were identified, the network participants could then work together

to resolve the issues or concerns before they became a crisis. One parent described how this took place.

> If there's things going on at your school and you've talked amongst your own school council, you've talked with the administrator and maybe even your school trustee, . . . but you can't really come up with some solution for some difficulty that the school council is having, in either managing what it is that they're doing, or if there's some concern from parents about something going on in the school or not going on in the school, at least if you can get together with the other members at the [Network of School Councils] there's that networking time where you can talk and say, "Okay this is something that's come up at our school, does anybody have any ideas or suggestions about how to deal with that?"

One trustee described how this openness was conducive to continuous improvement: "That kind of openness links itself to creativity and innovativeness which is clearly what you want; rather than being, again, boxed in by an established policy of this is the only way to deal with this situation." This trustee described how this proactive approach enabled him to foster continuous improvement rather than simply focus on "crisis management."

> I can speak to my colleagues at the board level with much more assurance and confidence that, in fact, I am hearing the real issues, not the individual complaints, or the individual isolated crisis that occur on a person by person or school by school basis, but the direction that we need to be moving as a school system. The difference is between fire fighting and building a solid structure that is responsive, not only in a given instance, but overall to the people who are using the educational system, by being responsive to the parents and their children.

This transparent, proactive, and inclusive approach resulted in greater "buy-in" throughout the district once a decision was made. One trustee described why this was necessary for continuous improvement.

> So I think you get home grown solutions then, rather than imported solutions. And when people can conceive of their own solution to a situation, they're going to be a lot more viable and probably ultimately pay off a whole lot more than an imported or super imposed solution to a situation.

By providing the opportunity for this honest, open, and frank conversation the network of school councils, according to one trustee, served as a "forum for dialogue"

and as a means for trustees to capitalize "on everything that's available to ensure ultimate performance, effectiveness, efficiency of the school division."

In summary, these networks of school councils were viewed as a means to enable school council representatives to have more informed, authentic, and effective participation in the public education system. They did so to the extent that they enabled more informed participation; enhanced opportunities for participation in the policy making process; fostered personal relationships; engendered trust; enhanced communication throughout the jurisdiction; engendered a sense of ownership and commitment towards the public education system; validated the legitimacy of school council involvement; increased the network participants' awareness of possible ways to be involved both at the school and the board levels and provided the opportunity for dialogue amongst the network participants.

The process of dialogue was viewed as a means to enable the network participants to focus on the "common good" rather than simply focus on the specific needs and desires of individual schools and their students; for issues to surface before they became a crisis; for creative and innovative ideas to come forward; for formal and informal learning; to foster continuous improvement throughout the system and as a valuable source of encouragement and hope for the network participants.

It appears that these perceived benefits accrued from the opportunities that these networks provided for involvement that was perceived and experienced as meaningful. The critical question, which is fundamental to this study, is: What was the nature of involvement that was experienced or perceived as meaningful through participation in these networks of school councils?

What Was The Nature of Involvement Experienced or Perceived As Meaningful?

These networks of school councils grew out of a desire to create an organization of school councils that would enable more meaningful involvement in the public education system. Those who initiated these networks were dissatisfied and frustrated with their participation in the original school council umbrella groups which they felt simply paid "lip service" to the notion of meaningful involvement. As I listened to the

respondents' stories, read and re-read the transcripts, categorized, and analyzed the data, I concluded that there were some common elements to involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful. I also concluded that a common sense of uneasiness–alluded to, but not spoken–lay just under the surface of their stories.

First, meaningful involvement was authentic involvement. That is, involvement that provided the parents and other members of the school council (not just the professionals and the trustees) with genuine (not contrived) opportunities for authentic (not token) participation in the public education system. These networks of school councils enabled authentic involvement because they were democratic, fostered a sense of ownership amongst the school council members, and because the chairperson, who was a school council representative elected by school council representatives, was responsible for the agenda and chaired the meetings.

Second, meaningful involvement was informed involvement. That is, involvement which enabled the parents and other members of the school council to acquire an informed understanding of the public education system through access to all available, relevant, and appropriate information, and through sharing information with each other at the network meetings.

Third, meaningful involvement was deliberative, active, and effective. That is, involvement that engaged *all* of the network participants–not just the professionals and the trustees–in discussions about educational matters, including philosophies, policies, programs, plans, priorities, and budgets. In addition, it was involvement that encouraged and supported all of the participants–including the school council representatives–to act in ways which capitalized on their individual talents and skills so that they could make a positive contribution to the public education system in ways that "made a difference for kids." As well, meaningful involvement was involvement that enabled the participants to fulfill their roles and responsibilities effectively. Parents, trustees, and administrators all perceived participation in the network to be meaningful when it helped them to do a better job as a school council representative, trustee, or professional.

Fourth, the process of dialogue was key to enabling involvement that was experienced as meaningful. The primary purpose of these networks was to provide

systematic and structured opportunities for them to talk to each other about educational matters. In order to make sense of the information they were learning through participation in these networks the participants indicated that they not only had to receive the information–they also had to be able to discuss it with each other. The respondents were very clear that participation in the networks was *not* meaningful if they were used as vehicles to simply download information from the board and central office to the school councils; to fundraise; or if they were structured as another layer in the education bureaucracy. The respondents were also very clear that meaningful involvement did not include the day-to-day management of the school jurisdiction or any of the responsibilities of the board of trustees.

In addition to these common elements, this study revealed a common sense of uneasiness about the nature of involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful. A recurrent theme which emerged from this study was that meaningful involvement is a fragile and tenuous ideal. Repeatedly, throughout the study, respondents pointed to a number of micro-political and macro-political forces, within the public education system, which worked against attaining involvement that was experienced or perceived as meaningful. The respondents clearly indicated that involvement, that was in any way meaningful, was not possible unless a belief in public participation in the public education system was shared throughout the jurisdiction by central administration, the board of trustees, principals, and parents.

CHAPTER 4: REVIEW, REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter provides an overview of the study, relates the research findings to the literature and provides reflections and recommendations based on the research findings. These are discussed within the context of an emerging conceptual framework about the nature of involvement that is perceived and experienced as meaningful.

Summary of the Study

Purpose

My purpose in studying these networks of school councils was to understand the experiences and perceptions of those who participated in them. In doing so I hoped to learn if these networks of school councils enabled involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful and, if so, the nature of such involvement.

The central questions that guided this study were: Does participation in a network of school councils enable meaningful involvement in the public education system? And, if so, in what ways? A number of more specific questions served as guides to the study and to the analysis of the data. These questions are as follows:

1. What led to the development of these networks of school councils?
2. What were the goals of these networks of school councils?
3. How were these networks of school councils implemented?
4. What sustained their implementation?
5. What were the benefits of these networks of school councils?
6. What was the nature of involvement experienced or perceived as meaningful?

Methodology

This interpretive, exploratory case study was designed to examine the operation of networks of school councils in at least two Alberta school jurisdictions from the perspectives of the individuals who participated in them. The intent was to understand if participation in these networks enabled "meaningful involvement" and , if so, in what ways? A purposive sampling procedure was used to select seven parents, two trustees and

three administrators who served as key informants about the network of school councils. Though semi-structured interviews were the source of the data used in this study, participants were encouraged to talk about networks of school councils and meaningful involvement from their individual perspectives.

To maintain trustworthiness of the data for credibility and dependability the transcripts and data analysis were reviewed by colleagues and by the respondents for their revision and comments. A interpretive approach, which reflects the respondent's perceptions about networks of school councils and meaningful involvement, was used in reporting the data.

The Networks of School Councils

Networks of school councils are now beginning to form in some Alberta school jurisdictions. They are new entities and they are not required by the School Act. They provide another avenue for parental and school council involvement in the public education system. Networks of school councils operating in two different school jurisdictions were the focus of this study. These networks were volunteer organizations which existed simply because those who participate in them chose to do so. The purpose of these networks was to create a mechanism for school council representatives to meet with each other and with representatives from central administration and the board of trustees.

One jurisdiction had policy in place to guide the operation and functioning of the network of school councils. The policy enabling this network had been developed through a consultation process which sought school council input in the development of the policy and school council ownership of the network of school councils. This network was formally established in February of 1996 and was open to participation by all of the school councils in the jurisdiction. Of the 30 school councils, approximately 15-20 were represented, usually by one school council representative who was a parent, at each network meeting. In addition to the school council representatives, the superintendent, the chairperson of the board of trustees, the communications director of the jurisdiction, and the local representative of the Alberta Teachers' Association also attended each meeting. Principals usually did not attend the network meetings but were welcome to attend, if they chose to do

so, as was anyone else who was a member of a school council within the jurisdiction or a member of the board of trustees. Even though the principals did not usually attend the network meetings they did receive a copy of the minutes of these meetings. This network had been preceded by another umbrella organization of school councils which ceased to exist when school boards were amalgamated in this region.

The other jurisdiction did not have policy in place enabling the networks of school councils which were in operation. In this jurisdiction, the networks of school councils were grass-roots initiatives of the school councils which participated in them and simply existed because those who participated in them chose to do so. During the time of this study I was aware of two networks of school councils which were operating in this jurisdiction.

The first of these two networks began operating in June of 1995. It did not involve all of the approximately 80 school councils in the jurisdiction. Participation in this network was open only to those 12 school councils whose schools were located within the boundaries of the network. Eight to ten school councils were typically represented at each network meeting. Each school council was encouraged to send at least two representatives to the meetings. While not every school council sent two, there often were two and sometimes even more than two parent representatives from the same school council, in attendance. Some of the school principals or vice principals or both attended the network meetings as well. In addition, the school trustees whose ridings included the school councils who participated in the network were also invited to attend the network meetings. While there were three trustees who were eligible to attend these meetings only one of them attended on a regular basis. The minutes of these meetings were sent to one of the school council representatives and the school principal of each school council that was eligible to participate in the network. The Superintendent and the eligible trustees also received copies of the minutes.

A second network was operating in this jurisdiction at the time of this study. It began as a grass-roots initiative in the fall of 1997 and was modeled on the above network. This network met four times during the 1997-98 school year and their meetings usually had 6 or 7 out of a possible 13 school councils represented. According to the respondents, this network met with considerable resistance from one school principal and was not actively

supported by any of their trustees and, as a result, ceased to operate at the end of the 1997-98 school year. In addition to these networks an umbrella group of school councils also operated in the jurisdiction. This umbrella group had been in existence for about ten years and was the formally recognized body for school council participation.

The original umbrella groups which preceded these networks of school councils were initiated and operated by central administration and the board of trustees. Dissatisfaction and frustration with the nature of the involvement that was available to parents and school councils through participation in these umbrella groups led to the development of the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study. It was the intention of those who initiated these new networks to create organizations that would enable more meaningful involvement.

Major Findings

What I discovered was that these networks of school councils did enable more meaningful involvement than the original school council umbrella groups and there were some common elements of involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful. The ways that these networks of school councils enabled meaningful involvement appeared to be linked to four key conditions.

First, the extent to which the network provided genuine opportunities for authentic participation of the school council representatives, in the public education system. Second, the extent to which the network enabled the school council representatives to have an informed understanding of the public education system. Third, the extent to which the networks enabled the school council representatives to participate in deliberations about educational matters, to act in ways that made a positive contribution to the public education system, and to be effective participants in the public education system. Fourth, the extent to which the networks enabled the school council representatives to talk to each other openly, honestly, and freely and to share information with each other about educational matters.

I also discovered that a common sense of uneasiness was inherent to involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful. A major theme that emerged from this study was that meaningful involvement is a fragile and tenuous ideal.

Reflections on the Findings as Related to the Literature

This study offers some insight into the essential elements of involvement that is perceived or experienced as meaningful and how participatory reforms can both succeed and fail to result in meaningful involvement. While much is written in the education literature about the need for parental participation and community involvement in the public education system, it is becoming apparent that, in actual practice, participation and involvement are more rhetoric than reality. As Anderson (1998) points out,

> Current educational reforms . . . contain a pervasive discourse of participation. Although calls for participation of teachers, students, parents, communities, business, and numerous other stakeholders in school are central to most reforms, there is increasing evidence that much participatory reform is either bogus, superficial or ineffective. (p.571)

The findings of this study support Anderson's claim. The central purpose of these networks of school councils was to enable meaningful involvement in the public education system. Those who initiated these networks were dissatisfied and frustrated with the original school council umbrella groups. At best, they felt these umbrella groups simply paid "lip service" to the notion of meaningful involvement. At worst, they felt manipulated and misled. They wanted an organization of school councils that would provide them with meaningful–not token–involvement. A number of challenges and barriers had to be overcome to create the necessary conditions for these networks to achieve their intended purpose. The first task that these networks faced was to create an organization that provided genuine opportunities for authentic participation in the public education system.

Genuine Opportunities for Authentic Participation

Anderson (1998) suggests that current attempts to implement participatory reform are often unsuccessful because they are intended to maintain the status quo rather than enable transformative change throughout the system. He identifies four key sources of inauthenticity in participatory reforms. First, that participation is undertaken more as an exercise in public relations and an attempt to maintain the legitimacy of the organization, rather than actually devolving any power or control of the organization to the participants. Second, participation is implemented as a disciplinary practice and form of control, rather

than as a means to empower the participants. Third, participation becomes a form of collusion which maintains the status quo rather than a form of participation that enables transformative change. Fourth, participation is implemented as a form of consumerism, rather than as a form of citizenship.

Inauthentic Participation

According to Mann (1976) participation is merely a form of public relations when it promotes: "'(1) One-way communications, (2) a concentration on support for existing arrangements, (3) a definition of the citizen as dependent consumer, and (4) a definition of the educator as an autonomous professional'" (as cited in Anderson, 1998, p.576).

Clearly the original umbrella groups that preceded these networks of school councils were operating in the public relations paradigm. Communication was "top-down" and a "one way street"; the agenda was determined and controlled by central administration or the board of trustees, or both; and items that challenged the status quo were rarely, if ever, discussed at the meetings [and in one instance were even removed from the agenda]; parents and citizens were seen as dependent and passive recipients of information that administration felt they either wanted or needed to know; and the professionals or the politicians decided if and when they would seek parental and school council input on policy.

Rather than actually empowering the parents or school councils, these original umbrella groups simply served as a means to disseminate information to parents. Parents and school councils did not control the meetings, could not contribute to the agenda, could not access the necessary information to participate meaningfully in deliberations about education matters, and did not have any formal role in the policy-making process. Accordingly, these original umbrella groups were perceived by the respondents to be nothing more than "token" attempts by central administration and the board of trustees to pay "lip service" to the notion of parental and school council involvement. Anderson (1998) describes activities undertaken by centralized bureaucracies to give the appearance of democratic participation and responsiveness to local need, but which do not actually

require the central bureaucracy to give up any of its power or control of the organization, as "legitimating rituals."

Some of the parents who participated in these original school council umbrella groups became tired and frustrated with the superficial and contrived approach of the umbrella groups. Instead of public relations and legitimating rituals, these parents wanted organizations of school councils that would actually enable them to participate in deliberations about educational matters with central administration and the board of trustees.

Anderson (1998) advises that participatory reforms which are intended to increase democratic participation often result in the participants buying into the vision and goals which have been determined, not by the participants, but elsewhere. "In most management and leadership models, participation is not used to create or challenge goals but to incorporate members into existing ones" (p.579). This results in what Barker (1993) describes as "'concertive control'" rather than bureaucratic control (as cited in Anderson, 1998, p.579). According to Anderson,

> The potential exercise of power by superordinates through concertive control has important implications for participatory decision-making . . . . Participation becomes a potential disciplinary practice that embodies forms of unobtrusive or nonovert control in which control no longer appears to come from outside the organizational members' sphere of activities. According to Barker (1993) the "relative success of participatory approaches hinges not on reducing control but on achieving a system of control that is more effective than that of other systems (p.433)." (1998, p.580)

Unlike the original umbrella groups, these networks of school councils were intended to actually empower the parents and school councils and enable them to participate in deliberations about educational matters. The participants in these networks did not want the networks to become yet another form of "concertive control." As one parent explained,

> Previously the superintendent would stand up and he would chair the meeting. (It was always a he.) He would chair the meeting, and had set the agenda–so there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity to impact that. But, with the election of a chair from one of the reps to the [Network of School Councils] that substantially altered that situation and we had a great deal more control over the organization.

It appears that these networks of school councils were an attempt to militate against what Waller termed the *authority principle.* According to Johnson and Pajares,

> Writing in 1932, Waller observed that schools are organized around an authority principle–a basic system of domination and subordination that permeates educational organizations from the classroom to the highest levels of school governance. The findings of Malen et al. (1990a) suggest that the authority principle is still in effect and is not necessarily altered by the creation of new governance structures. (as cited in Johnson & Pajares, 1996, pp. 600-601)

Certainly this was the experience of the participants who initiated these networks of school councils. The purpose of these networks was to alter the system of communication and subordination that characterized the original school council umbrella groups, and, in doing so, alter the status quo with respect to the role that parents and school councils played in the public education system.

Anderson also advises that "even when participation is reasonably egalitarian, it has seldom challenged the educational status quo" (1998, p. 580). This is due, in part, to the fact that "'school administrators and teachers tend to share a common professional culture and often collude against lay outsiders, generally dominating shared decision-making councils'" (Johnson & Pajares as cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 581). School administrators, according to Henry (1996), usually favour empowering the school staff over empowering the parents and when the positions between the two groups are contested will typically favour the staff over the parents (as cited in Anderson, 1998). As well, Anderson points out that participatory groups which are meant to foster dialogue often end up fostering a "professional monologue" because the participants defer to the professionals. This, he maintains, is often due to the power that is embedded in the hierarchy of professional knowledge "that places expert professional knowledge–replete with test scores, technical language, and institutional authority–at the top" (p.581).

The participants in these networks of school councils described the original umbrella groups as a professional monologue and they did not want this to reoccur in the networks of school councils. Rather, their first priority was to provide time for the school council representatives to talk to each other openly and honestly about anything that was of interest to them within the school system (other than personnel or individual student

concerns). This meant that steps had to be taken so that the meetings could not be used by the trustees and central administration to download information to the school council representatives. This was not a problem for the trustees who participated in this study. These trustees indicated that their preferred role was to listen to the discussion that occurred during these network meetings, rather than download information, because it assisted them to make better decisions at the board table. They were willing to provide information if asked, and to provide an update on current or upcoming issues, but their primary raison d'être was to listen to the discussion. As one trustee explained,

> I get to listen directly to the dialogue and I underline listen because I think that's important. Yes, I share information, but I tend not to participate in the debates that go on there. I try to listen because these are the issues that are important. I, in turn, can go back to the school board and speak with much greater confidence as to, not only the complaints that I get from individual constituents, but again, to those aspirations, and wishes and concerns that are collectively there in the schools in the geographic jurisdiction that I represent.

Anderson (1998) also suggests that authentic participatory reform requires a differentiation between "participation as consumerism and participation as citizenship" (p. 584). He maintains that furthering the notion of participation as consumerism envisions a role for parents as consumers of a public good for the benefit of their particular children and is the rationale that often underlies the provision of school choice as a means to enhance parental participation in the education system. According to Peters this reduces public education to an "'enterprise culture'" which calls for "'remodeling institutions along commercial lines'" (as cited in Anderson, 1998 p.586).

The very existence of these networks leads one to assume that those who participated in them did not want to abandon participation as a reform strategy and adopt market-oriented reforms. If they had wanted market-oriented reforms it is unlikely that they would have volunteered the time and energy it took to create networks of school councils that enabled meaningful involvement. However, according to the respondents, very few parents were prepared to put in the time and energy required to effect the changes needed to enable authentic participation. For many parents, the provision of choice was more

appealing than struggling to create networks of school councils which enabled meaningful–as opposed to contrived–involvement. As one parent explained,

> The other dozen people that I have seen come and go over the years just don't want to do that old stuff and yet they don't, aren't willing to put in the time and energy it takes to effect change. They will either just say, "Ah we'll go to a charter school" or "We'll go to a private school" or "I care about my kid, I'll get a private tutor . . . " . . . their attitude is basically, "Well I've only got so much time and energy so I'll focus on my kid."

The specific intent of these networks was to transform the role that parents and school councils played in the public education system. These networks of school councils were intended to provide parents and school councils with genuine opportunities for authentic participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. According to Anderson (1998),

> Authentic participation moves beyond concerns with legitimacy and public relations to shared control. It conceives of participation as important for the development of the individual, important for the creation of democratic institutions, and important as a means to increase learning outcomes. Its definition of politics is broadened to include issues of equity as well as the more subtle, behind-the-scenes ways that power is exercised in educational systems. Finally, it defines democracy as participatory rather than merely representative and results in more active and informed citizens and institutions with greater moral authority. (p. 595)

Authentic Participation

In determining if, in actual practice, these networks of school councils were successful in enabling authentic participation it is first necessary to decide how to evaluate the authenticity of participation. Anderson (1998) has developed a conceptual framework to assist in examining the authenticity of participatory practices which was helpful in assessing the effectiveness of these networks in enabling authentic participation. This framework consists of a series of five interrelated questions: 1) Participation towards what end? 2) Who participates? 3) What are the relevant spheres of participation? 4) What conditions and processes must be present locally to make participation authentic (that is, the micropolitics of participation)? 5) What conditions and processes must be present at

broader institutional and societal levels to make participation authentic (that is, the macropolitics of participation)?

Participation toward what end? Anderson maintains that "authenticity depends on the explicitness of the ends-in-view and the extent to which a discourse of democratic participation is used merely for legitimating purposes" (p.588). One of the primary goals of these networks was to confront the superficiality and contrivance of the involvement afforded through participation in the original umbrella groups and to provide genuine and authentic opportunities for parents and school councils to have an equal and informed voice in deliberations about policies, priorities, programs, budgets and philosophies of the school jurisdiction. In other words, these networks were intended to provide parents and school councils with genuine and authentic opportunities to participate in the democratic decision making processes of the public education system.

According to the respondents, these networks of school councils did, in fact, empower the parents and school councils and did enlarge the scope of activities that were available to them to participate in. These networks, rather than simply disseminating information to the parents and the school councils, provided genuine opportunities for parents to talk to the professionals and trustees about educational matters, as opposed to talking about fundraising and bake sales. As well, these networks enabled the parents and school councils to have better access to information; to voice their concerns and ask questions directly of the trustees and administrators; to participate in the policy-making process; and to have two-way (as opposed to "top-down") communication with the board of trustees and central administration. In addition, the respondents reported that these networks validated the legitimacy of parental and school council involvement in the public education system and increased awareness throughout the jurisdiction of the possible ways parents and school councils could play a meaningful role–both at the school and jurisdictional level.

Barber (1998) maintains that opportunities for participation in the democratic decision-making processes should enhance the power of a community and enlarge their scope of activities (p.7). It appears that these networks were able to enhance the influence of the school councils and enlarge their scope of activities. However, the degree to which

they were able to do so varied between the two jurisdictions. The network enabled by policy was successful in providing genuine and authentic opportunities for all of the school councils in the jurisdiction to participate in the democratic decision-making processes of the board of trustees. This, in part, can be attributed to a culture which supported and encouraged authentic parental and school council participation at both the school and jurisdictional levels. In addition, not only did this jurisdiction have policy in place which enabled the network of school councils, it also had policy in place to guide the public consultation process that would be used in developing policies for the jurisdiction.

The networks which did not have policy in place to enable and legitimize their operation were not as successful in enabling authentic participation. The official route for school council participation continued to be the original school council umbrella group, which was not perceived to enable authentic participation. In addition, not all of the school councils in the jurisdiction participated in these networks. As a result, these grass-roots initiatives were only able to extend more authentic opportunities for participation to the parents and school councils within the bounded areas of the networks; and even then, the influence they had was limited. In one network, none of the eligible trustees attended the network meetings, and only one of a possible three trustees regularly attended the meetings in the other network. In addition, these networks did not have a formal role to play in providing advice to the board. However, because they were able to act collectively, the school councils which belonged to these grass-roots networks probably had more influence with the board of trustees and central administration than they would have had as individual school councils.

What was not clear in either of these jurisdictions is whether or not concertive control was a factor at the school level and influenced the positions taken by the school council representatives at the network of school council meetings. If the school council was in the practice of consulting widely with the broader school community, with respect to issues discussed at the network meetings, then it is likely that the views expressed by the school council representative(s) would reflect the views of the broader school community. However, if the school council did not consult the broader school community and if the principal had a great deal of influence over the school council, the school council

representative(s) was at risk of putting forward the principal's views as the school community's view at the network meetings. That is to say, it was at risk of self-identifying with the principal's views rather than developing a view that reflected the aims and desires of the broader school community, and then expressing the principal's view, rather than the school community's view, at the network meetings.

There was no way of monitoring whose views the school council representatives were bringing to the network meetings. However, one network specifically asked that more than one representative from each school council attend the network meetings in the hope that this would better enable a broader representation of views.

Who Participates? According to Anderson (1998), "the question of who participates will partly depend on the ends in view." Golarz and Golarz (1995) advise that, in a democratic society, all those who are affected by decisions should be provided opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes.

> The coordinated efforts of concerned citizens, educators, parents, and all other affected members of a community are needed to improve our schools. No one should be overlooked–not the bus driver, not the custodian, not the local business owners, and surely not the students. No longer can groups of people work in isolation, at cross purposes, or without the necessary understanding and support of those who are affected by their decisions. (p.29)

Golarz and Golarz also maintain that,

> Participatory governance aims to meaningfully involve all those people who are affected by decisions made relative to the educational structure in their community. By involving and empowering widening circles of representative individuals, communities can gain the power to shape the culture and the essence of local schools. (p.12)

Certainly, this was the intent of these networks, and because the membership in a school council is to include parents, teachers, students, and community representatives, in theory, it should be representative of all those who would be affected by decisions made at the jurisdictional level. However, as discussed above, this required the school council representatives who participated in the network to bring the collective view of the school community, and not their individual views, to the network meetings. This meant that the school council representative needed to have sufficient time to share information with the

other school council members and the school council needed to have sufficient time to consult broadly with the school community. Again, the extent to which these networks were able to do so varied.

The network enabled by policy attained a high degree of authenticity with respect to the criteria of who participates because board policy clearly spelled out the network's role. In addition, this board also had policy in place which spelled out how school councils would be involved in the consultation process used by the board to develop jurisdiction policy. According to the respondents, this policy stipulated that the board should allow a minimum of six weeks circulation time when seeking school council input into district policy. In the grass-roots initiatives, on the other hand, the school board was not required to consult with the school councils in the development of district policy, and often chose not to do so. While the school council legislation provides school councils the right to advise the board on any matter relating to the school, it appeared that the status quo in this jurisdiction questioned the legitimacy of this role. In addition, as mentioned above, this network only included some of the school councils in the jurisdiction, so it was not representative of all those who would be affected by a decision.

One area of concern in both of these networks, with regard to who participates, is the lack of participation by classroom teachers in the networks. Classroom teachers typically did not participate in either of these networks. When school based personnel attended, it was usually the principal or a vice-principal. Unless either the school principal or the school council representative brought the classroom teachers' perspective to the network meetings–their voice was absent. Presumably their views would be reflected in the school council deliberations, but because teachers tend not to be very active or very vocal in many school councils, and because it is questionable whether or not one teacher member of a school council can adequately represent all of the school's staff–it is doubtful that teachers' views were adequately represented at the network meetings. The network enabled by policy, did, however, have a representative of the Alberta Teachers' Association attend regularly. While he may not have adequately represented the classroom teachers' views he was at least able to represent teachers' views from the perspective of the provincial association.

What are the relevant spheres of participation? Golarz and Golarz (1995) advise that in participatory governance, "All of the issues surrounding the role of public education–issues that relate fundamentally and consistently to the purpose of education–must be addressed."(p.30). One of the key goals of these networks was to provide genuine opportunities to parents and school councils to advise and consult the board of trustees and central administration on matters of philosophies, policies, priorities, programs, and budgets with respect to the education of the children who attended public schools in the jurisdiction.

In the jurisdiction where the network was enabled by policy this occurred systematically and regularly–to the point where it became necessary to avoid information overload and ensure that the school councils were only consulted on issues that were relevant to them. In the jurisdiction where the networks were grass-roots initiatives, the extent to which this occurred was minimal. This network was able to provide advice and consult with the one trustee who regularly attended the meetings, but because they were not recognized as an "official" school council organization they did not have any formalized opportunity to provide advice to the entire board of trustees or to central administration. While this did not stop them from sending memos and letters to the board about their questions or concerns, the influence they had was limited because they were not recognized as a legitimate organization of school councils.

What conditions and processes must be present at the micro-political level? According to Knight-Abowitz (1997),

> Participatory reforms cannot be understood without understanding how participation is mediated by politics and culture, . . . politics and power are embedded in a school's culture, resulting in a form of cultural politics that makes successful implementation of participatory structures more complex than current research indicates. (as cited in Anderson,1998, p.593)

Certainly this was the experience of many of the respondents in this study. While these networks were intended to enable authentic participation of parents and school councils at the macro-political level, it was exceedingly difficult for the networks to succeed if they did not have the support at the micro-political level.

One network, which had considerable resistance from the principal of the school council who initiated the network, experienced considerable difficulty in getting the network established, in part, because they did not have the support they needed to organize and hold meetings and to communicate with other school councils at the micro-political level. In addition, the parents who initiated this network not only lacked the support of their school principal, they also lacked the support at the macro-political level. They did not have the support of their local trustee and there was no policy in place to legitimize the network. In the end this network only lasted a year.

In contrast, another grass-roots network in this jurisdiction did have assistance and support at the micro-political level. The principal of the school council which initiated the network encouraged the establishment of the network and was an active participant and advocate of the network. Several other principals followed suit and they, too, became active participants and supporters of this network. In addition, this network had the active support and encouragement of at least one of their trustees. Accordingly, even though this network did not have board policy to enable it, and apparently met with resistance from central administration and most of trustees, it is now into its fourth year of operation.

This example substantiates Anderson's (1998) claim that "there is much current evidence that courageous democratic leaders in schools and central offices can foster conditions in schools that open up space for authentic participation " (p.593). However, the micro-political conditions necessary for authentic participation are not only influenced by the professionals. Parents, too, must consider such participation a part of the parental role and worth their time and energy. As Anderson points out,

> The potential of participation is most fully realized when the commitments and energies of democratic leaders are directed in concert with courageous followers toward the elimination of the institutional and psychological barriers to authentic forms of democratic participation. (p.594)

The greatest challenge, at the micro-political level, in enabling authentic democratic participation, may well be engaging the parents. Even in the jurisdiction enabled by policy, where a commitment to authentic parental and school council participation was embedded throughout the jurisdiction, the network continually had to work at sustaining school

council participation in the network. This was primarily due to the high turn over rate in the membership of the school councils. At the beginning of each school year the network chair had to ensure that every school council was aware of the network and was invited to send a representative or representatives to attend the network meetings. In addition, they found they had more participation if they planned their agendas well ahead and communicated them early to the school councils. It was also helpful if the meetings were scheduled so they did not conflict with meetings of the board of trustees or individual school councils. Attendance was also better when they had an educational component to the evening. Parents were more likely to attend if they were provided with information about curriculum, learning styles or any other topics which would help them understand what their children were learning in school and how they could assist them to be more successful students.

In one instance parents who served on the school council did not want to devote much of their school council meeting time to discussions about issues that were raised at the network of school council meetings. According to the respondent, this was an unusual occurrence, and seemed to be related to one specific council–but it may well be a factor that has to be considered in implementing networks of school councils.

What conditions and processes must be present at the macro-political level? Anderson (1998) advises that,

> While a deeper understanding of the micropolitics of participation is a necessary move toward more authentic forms of participation, we must not assume that educational institutions and systems will tolerate authentic spaces once they are created. (p.594)

The specific intent of both of these networks was to create an authentic space for parental and school council participation at the macro-political level in their respective school jurisdictions. To achieve the intended purpose, a number of conditions and processes had to be in place at the macro-political level. First, the networks had to be democratic. To this end, every school council in the bounded area of the network was eligible to participate in the network and accorded one vote in the organization.

Second, the school councils had to retain ownership of the network. In the network enabled by policy this was achieved by ensuring that school councils were actively involved

in developing the policy. The board even went so far as to agree to pass this policy without making any changes to it, once it had been approved by the network of school councils. In the grass-roots networks ownership by the school councils was assured because the networks were initiated, organized, and operated by the school councils independent of the board of trustees and central administration.

Third, in addition to retaining ownership of the networks, the school councils also needed to retain control of the network. This was achieved by ensuring that only the school councils had voting privileges and that the chairperson of the network was elected by the school councils. In addition to chairing the meetings, the network chairperson also needed to retain control of the agenda. However, the agenda was open to all of the network participants. Any network participant, whether a school council representative, a trustee, or someone from central administration could ask the chair of the network to have an item placed on the agenda.

As well, participation in these networks had to be voluntary and the membership in them had to be open and flexible. That is, each school council, and not the network, determined if it wanted to participate, how many representatives it wanted to have, and who those representatives would be. In one jurisdiction the superintendent and the chair of the board of trustees were expected to serve as a liaison with the network. Their obvious commitment and support of the networks helped to mitigate any macro-political barriers as well as any micro-political barriers that may have been present at the school level.

Furthermore, the networks had to be small enough in size to enable dialogue and the trustees and central administrators who participated in the network had to ensure that they did not dominate the meetings. It was essential that these networks were informal rather than formal and consensual rather than adversarial. This meant that the chair had to serve more as a facilitator of the discussion rather than as director or controller of the meeting. To this end, standard formalized meeting procedures, such as Robert's Rules of Order, were not used. Instead, the chairpersons focused on creating an environment that was conducive to dialogue and enabling the discussion.

The boundaries of the discussion had to be clear. These networks were not a forum for discussing personnel issues–this was clearly spelled out in both jurisdictions. As well,

participants clearly understood that private matters relating to specific individuals or students were not to be discussed.

To ensure that these networks enabled meaningful involvement (as opposed to superficial, contrived or inappropriate involvement) there also had to be a clear understanding, amongst all of the participants, about what these networks were *not* intended to do. These networks were clearly not intended to be fundraising organizations, because as one parent explained, "it becomes way too easy to shift you off as the fundraising group and then limit the opportunities to impact policy." As well, it was very clear that these networks were not intended to be another hierarchical bureaucratic organization with decision-making authority or which controlled or directed the school councils. Rather, they were simply intended to enable participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. Furthermore, they were not intended to replace the voice of the individual school councils. At times the network might decide to put forward a collective view, but the individual school councils were under no obligation to support it or agree with it. Finally, these networks were not intended to duplicate or replace the board of trustees–they were simply intended to enable authentic participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction.

To function effectively these networks needed some minimal financial resources to enable communication. Sometimes these were provided by central administration and sometimes by the individual school councils. Support for human resources from central administration varied. When the superintendent and board of trustees were supportive of authentic participation, support from central administration was perceived to be beneficial. When the board of trustees and the superintendent did not appear to be supportive of the networks, support from central office was perceived as a possible threat to authentic participation.

In summary, the extent to which these networks met Anderson's criteria for authentic participation varied: the network enabled by policy was considerably more successful at enabling authentic participation than were either of the grass-roots networks. At first glance it appears that this success can be attributed to the policy enabling the network of school councils. However, the reason for this jurisdiction's success goes far

beyond matters of policy. While all of the above conditions were necessary to enable the effective implementation of networks of school councils, they were not sufficient to mitigate either the micro-political or the macro-political forces that work against authentic participation. Clearly, unless a commitment to authentic public participation in the public education system was embedded throughout the jurisdiction and amongst the parents themselves, these networks could not, and did not, enable authentic participation.

While the provision of genuine opportunities for authentic participation, as described above, was absolutely essential for these networks to enable meaningful involvement it was not the only requirement for involvement that was perceived to be meaningful. In addition, the network participants also had to be well-informed.

An Informed Understanding

> As Jefferson recognized long ago, if citizens use their power indiscreetly, the remedy is not to take their power from them but to inform their discretion. The task for social democrats, then, is to educate democracy, to help persuade citizens that their interests lie not in dismantling government and liberating the commercial sector in the name of "free markets" but in putting democracy to work in the name of common goods. (Barber, 1998, p.40)

One of the goals of these networks was to provide parents and school councils with timely access to complete and understandable information. The respondents indicated that they could not participate in any meaningful way without an informed understanding of the issues. As Barber (1984) points out, "information is indispensable to the responsible exercise of citizenship and to the development of political judgment" (p.278). To acquire this enlightened understanding, all available relevant information had to be shared openly, willingly, widely, and in a timely manner throughout the jurisdiction.

There was considerable difference between the two jurisdictions in how openly information was shared. In the network enabled by policy the board of trustees and central office attempted to provide whatever information the school council representatives either wanted or needed to know. According to the respondents from this network, this jurisdiction clearly demonstrated a willingness and openness to share in anything the participants asked. The parents and other school council representatives were never made to

feel that they shouldn't be asking for information. The only thing the district reserved sharing information on was personnel issues and this was clearly stated in the board policy which enabled the network.

This jurisdiction even went so far as to release accommodation studies done by an outside consultant to the network of school councils–in draft form–so that they would have the same opportunity as the board of trustees and central administration to consider and respond to this information. They did so, according to one administrator, because "our relationship with them was if we saw this as something that was of interest to the system we would bring it to them." Barber (1998) maintains that when citizens are well-informed they can participate in the democratic decision-making process as effectively as their leaders.

In the jurisdiction where the networks were grass-roots initiatives it was much more difficult for the networks to access the relevant information. If their trustee was free to disclose the information, he would; however, the respondents indicated that information was not readily accessible. In contrast to the above example, it took this network over a year to get a copy of the accommodation studies done in this jurisdiction. Golarz and Golarz (1995) maintain that the reluctance to enable access to information is characteristic of most public institutions.

> We seem to possess a national mind-set that those who hold political power and/or perform their roles at the upper levels of bureaucracy are somehow mystically empowered to make wiser decisions. . . . The only edge that bureaucrats hold over the rest of the people is access to information. If all that is known at the upper levels of government or educational organizations were shared, then decisions at all levels would be made more wisely. In addition and most importantly, the directions chosen by those most affected would include ownership and commitment to making things happen. (p. 35)

While reluctance to share information with the public may be characteristic of most public institutions, it does not fit with these respondents' conception of meaningful involvement, nor does it fit with Dahl's criterion for a democratic process. According to Dahl (1993), enlightened understanding requires that "each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the

need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests" (p.57).

Achieving this ideal proved a difficult matter for these networks of school councils. As one parent explained,

> One of our frustrations was making the board and the administration realize that it didn't do any good to give us information at the last minute and expect a decent response; that they had to be more organized about getting information out to us sooner and recognizing that there was a process to follow . . . . But regardless of how the process worked, there had to be enough time in there to respond effectively. And while some chairs certainly felt comfortable giving their opinions about issues, we didn't want that to be the process. The process was to involve school councils and parents at the school level so that they could have an opportunity to voice their opinion of things–not just create another bureaucratic organization that would pretend or have the pretense of always representing their views. We didn't want to do that.

The important point here is that these networks of school councils were not intended to function along the lines of a traditional representative organization. Rather, their role was to enable informed participation by all members of the school community in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. This required a conception of the school council as a vehicle to involve the school community in the deliberations of the network.

Deliberative, Active and Effective Participation

> Participation entails constant activity, ceaseless willing, and endless interaction with other participants in quest of common grounds for common living. . . . while the election of representatives requires some periodic activity from citizens, it is a political act whose purpose is to terminate political action for all but the elected delegates. It achieves accountability by alienating responsibility, and leaves elected politicians as the only real citizens of the state. (Barber, 1998, p.12)

One of the key purposes of these networks of school councils was to provide the school councils with systematic, structured, and ongoing opportunities to participate in deliberations about policies, priorities, programs, budgets, and philosophies. One trustee

described this as a "bottom up" approach to democracy–rather than simply being a form of "top down" control.

> When governance is a top down imposition of rules, legislation has been created in a vacuum, rather than on the basis of the input that comes from the grass-roots. You have an entirely different democratic process occurring. And I don't even know if I can call it democratic.

Where the network was enabled by policy, the network played an active role in such deliberations. In this jurisdiction, the network was consulted by the board of trustees to help the board determine if a broad policy was necessary or if the issue was best dealt with at the school level. When it was agreed that a jurisdiction-wide policy was appropriate, this network, as well as the individual school councils, had the opportunity to be involved in developing such policies. This active participation in policy development was thought to result in policies that were more responsive and enabling. As one of the participants explained, "I think that it does allow parents to have that impact on very broad policy which in turn ends up determining what kind of places schools can be." In addition, this active participation in the deliberative processes fostered a sense of responsibility, ownership, and commitment amongst the parents and the school councils for the decisions made by the board of trustees and the actions taken by central administration. As Sarason (1995) points out, "'a democratic decision-making process results in broader support for decisions and an increased likelihood of effective implementation. Further, decisions are better when the people affected participate in making them'" (as cited in Beck, 1998, p.37).

Barber (1998) advises that "the trouble with representative institutions is that they often turn the act of sovereign authorization into an act of civic deauthorization" (p.98). Furthermore, he maintains that "citizens need fair and caring leaders, but such leadership ought to enhance their own activity rather than replace it" (p.103). Clearly, with the exception of one trustee, this was not the case in the grass-roots networks. In this jurisdiction, participation in the jurisdiction's democratic decision making processes remained the purview of the board of trustees. Only one trustee actively encouraged the parents and the school councils to play an active role in deliberations about educational matters. According to this trustee, this enabled him to better represent his constituents at the board table.

In addition to being deliberative, in order to be meaningful, participation could not simply be participation for participation's sake. Rather, the participation had to be worthwhile that is, it had to actively engage the school council representatives in ways that enabled them to be actively engaged in the public education system. These network participants wanted to be able to act in ways that would allow them to capitalize on their individual strengths and talents, to enhance and improve the public education system. One parent described meaningful involvement as participating in a way that made her feel like she had really "made a difference." According to Golarz and Golarz (1995), "participatory governance in education is another example of a natural response to what exists in the hearts of a growing number of people: the desire to share in the events and processes that affect their lives" (p.16).

It appears that these networks of school councils were, in effect, intended to enable participatory governance of the public education system. However, participatory governance is not typically how public education is governed in Alberta school jurisdictions. Typically, the public's participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction is primarily limited to voting for trustees at election time. However, as Barber (1998) points out,

> The equality with which voters enter the polling booth disappears into the ballot box along with their vote. Electoral activity reduces citizens to alienated spectators–at best, watchdogs with residual and wholly passive functions of securing the accountability of those to whom they have turned over their sovereignty. Under the representative system, leaders turn electors into followers; and the correct posture for followers is deference. Democracy becomes a system that defines how elites are chosen–in Joseph Schumpeter's classical definition, elective oligarchy, in which the subjugated public from time to time selects the elites who otherwise govern it. Democratic politics thus becomes a matter of what leaders do, something that citizens watch, rather than something they do. (p.98)

Those who initiated these networks of school councils were no longer satisfied simply serving as a deferential electorate, no longer satisfied with being the passive recipients of information, no longer content to simply serve as observers of the democratic decision-making process or to serve as its watchdog. Rather, they wanted ongoing opportunities to participate in the democratic decision making processes that would affect

their children's lives. It appears, then, that the intent of these networks of school councils was to make fundamental changes to the essential nature of representative democracy itself.

The Crucial Importance of Dialogue

> Thus it is that democracy, if it is to survive the shrinking of the world and the assaults of a hostile modernity, will have to rediscover its multiple voices and give to citizens once again the power to speak, to decide and to act; for in the end human freedom will be found not in caverns of private solitude, but in the noisy assemblies where women and men meet daily as citizens and discover in each other's talk the consolation of a common humanity. (Barber, 1984, p.311)

Consistently throughout the study the respondents indicated that the central purpose of these networks of school councils was to provide an opportunity for the network participants to talk to each other so that they could "share information" and "network." One respondent said that "sharing information" was the "whole purpose of the organization" and defined networking as "a frank discussion of things that are of current interest within the school system." Another respondent, who initiated a network, was motivated to do so after observing a successful network in operation because of the opportunity it provided for dialogue.

> So we went there and we were just blown away. . . . It was just so amazing to us to see principals, and teachers and parents sitting around a table and just discussing issues in a really positive way because that isn't something we'd seen in our school. So we thought wouldn't it be just wonderful to get our [Network of School Councils] up and running as well.

In effect, these networks created a public space for public dialogue about public education. According to the respondents a number of benefits accrued through the process of public dialogue. To begin with, it enabled the participants to acquire a broader view of the issues, or as one trustee put it, "it takes the school councils into the bigger picture, so it gets away from just my school and my world." As well, trustees could get a "balance of information" rather than just hearing from the "squeaky wheel" and this assisted them in their decision-making processes at the board table. This opportunity to hear a variety of different viewpoints often resulted in the network participants changing their minds about a particular issue. "I've seen a lot of people shift their thinking once they hear about the

problems, the difficulties, the issues that other schools have." The opportunity to talk informally and freely enabled the participants to develop a shared understanding of the issues, which, in turn, fostered mutual respect for each other's needs and differences which, in turn, engendered a sense of trust. As one parent explained,

> It's made me realize there are different ways to do things. It's made me realize that if enough people start talking to each other and start talking the same language you can effect change. It's made me realize that the problems I have as a school council chair or an active member in my school community are shared by many other people.

Barber (1984) attests to the power of public dialogue to enable a more empathetic view.

> Talk of every kind–cognitive, prudential, exploratory, conversational, and affective–can enhance empathy, and there is perhaps no stronger social bone and no more significant ally of public thinking than the one fashioned by empathy . . . . Empathy reaches consensus by affirming commonality and affection ("I am like others" and "I like others"). (p.188)

As Barber (1984) points out, the presence of empathy enhances democratic decision-making processes.

> Empathy has a politically miraculous power to enlarge perspectives and expand consciousness in a fashion that not so much accommodates as transcends private interests and the antagonisms they breed. . . . The leap out of privatism and self-interest that democratic participation promotes is a leap to embrace strangers whose commonality with us arises less out of blood or geography or culture than out of talk itself. (p.189)

In addition to enabling a more empathetic view amongst the network participants, the process of dialogue helped to foster a sense of community. One participant described participation in the network as a "means of binding us together;" while another described it as way for them to be more like a "community." As Teurfs and Gerard (1993) point out, these are common benefits of dialogue.

> One might think of Dialogue as a stream of meaning flowing among and through a group of people, out of which might emerge some new understanding, something creative. Dialogue moves beyond any one individual's understanding, to build collective understanding and meaning. It helps make explicit the implicit and can build and sustain community. (p.4)

In addition, the respondents indicated that another benefit of dialogue was that it enabled mutual learning about how to implement more effective school councils and about how to improve the education system. As one network chairperson pointed out "these are very bright people and they have some very good ideas on how things can be done within the system." One trustee advised that the process of dialogue enabled him to be more connected to his constituents and more open to their views. This, then, enabled him to be more creative and innovative in addressing situations, instead of being "boxed in by an established policy." As well it enabled him to be more proactive.

> I think we can be more proactive and I think that's where our governance approach is taking us. It says get out there and connect with your constituents and dialogue with them to find out what the issues are so that it's not a case of eleventh hour crisis. Instead, it's a case of being tuned in, being sensitive to the issues before they reach the point of being a crisis and you may well have other opportunities for looking at alternative solutions other than that which is presented to you at the eleventh hour.

According to Ellinor and Gerard (1998) dialogue is a "learning conversation" that opens the door to more collaborative, creative and productive personal relationships and enables "double-loop learning and more coherent decisions that can shift the very culture and operational patterns of the organization" (p.302).

Finally, the respondents indicated that, through the process of dialogue, they could get feedback from each other and this was perceived to be a valuable source of support. This kind of connectedness removed the sense of isolation that they sometimes felt in their individual school communities and, in doing so, fostered a sense of hope. In other words, the process of dialogue enabled the development of a social network amongst the various participants. Tonn and Petrich (1998) maintain that,

> To build a social network, dialogue is needed. Schneider (1996) states that "conversation is the foundation upon which all political behavior is built." To support his point, he quotes John Dewey, who wrote in 1959 (as quoted in Post, 1993) that "democracy begins with conversation;" Barber (1984) who states that "there can be no strong democratic legitimacy without on-going talk;" and Ackerman (1989) who agrees that "dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship." (p.88)

These networks of school councils served as a means to institutionalize talk, that is they served as a means to enable the various members of the school community to participate in a dialogue about public education. The process of dialogue enabled these citizens to think together and to act together for the purpose of enhancing and improving public education–not for the benefit of their individual children or their individual schools–but for their collective benefit. As one parent explained,

> It's been very interesting to me to hear other people's points of view that are not the same as my own . . . and to be able to open my mind enough to hear that my way isn't always the only way and that there are other issues out there, there are other problems at schools with different neighborhoods, different makeups. So, I think it's given me a broader picture than I had before.

According to Barber the role that dialogue plays in focusing attention on the common good is essential to the democratic process,

> Talk helps us to overcome narrow self-interest, but it plays an equally significant role in buttressing the autonomy of individual wills that is essential to democracy. It is through talk that we constantly re-encounter, re-evaluate, and re-possess the beliefs, principles, and maxims on the basis of which we exert our will in the political realm. . . . Talk is the principal mechanism by which we can re-test and thus re-possess our convictions, which means that a democracy that does not institutionalize talk will soon be without autonomous citizens, though men and women who call themselves citizens may from time to time deliberate, choose and vote. (Barber, 1984, p.190-191)

However, Barber (1998) also maintains that such opportunities are typically not available in representative democracies. "In representative societies, talk is vertically structured, leaders talk to citizens, though citizens rarely talk to or among one another. There is little lateral interaction" (p.107).

What is unique about these networks of school councils is that they broke the traditional mould of vertical top-down communication typical of bureaucratic hierarchies and enabled lateral interaction for both the citizens and the leaders; that is they enabled parents, professionals, and trustees to talk amongst themselves about educational matters which, in turn, fostered an empathetic appreciation of each other's point of view. As Barber points out, the presence of empathy is key to the sustenance and maintenance of public

institutions which are intended to serve the common good. An example, provided by one respondent, attests to the power of dialogue in fostering empathetic appreciation.

> The teacher reps talk to the parents at their school council and then when the parents are talking at our [network of school councils meeting], some of the parents can speak from a teacher's point of view. "I talked to [our teacher rep] . . . this is what I think the teachers would think." So that has to help us a lot because it strengthens the partnership between the parents and the teachers.

For these respondents, meaningful involvement appears to have fostered an understanding of public education as a means to serve not only my interests or your interests–but to serve the common good. One trustee talked about the critical importance of the process of dialogue in fostering a commitment to the common good and the need to create spaces for such dialogue throughout the public education system.

> There needs to be another kind of process all the way through that is more meaningful. It is not a case of Alberta Education controlling, or the board controlling, or a system wide group of school councils controlling, but a process that allows grass-roots issues to rise to the level to which they should and could be addressed in the best interest of the common good–meaning one and all. I don't mean just parents and students, I don't mean just teachers, I don't mean just boards, I don't mean just politicians, but every one. Our entire community, our entire society in this province has to benefit by processes that facilitate a culture that is progressive. Status quo just doesn't cut it. What can I say?

These networks of school councils provided the opportunities for this "other kind of process" to occur. This other kind of process closely resembles Green's criteria for a more truly democratic politics which he described as follows:

> At a minimum, it would be a politics that is hospitable to informal conflict resolution in place of formal rules of order . . .; rewards dialogue and discussion rather than one-way "communication"; deepens and broadens processes of representation, so that more people from early childhood on are involved in the direct action of representing and being represented; and as much as possible devolves rule-making powers, not of exclusion but of self-governance, to communities defined by and defining themselves through a project of joint action. (1993, p. 18).

The nature of involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful through participation in these networks of school councils speaks to the ideal of a more truly

democratic politics in the governance of public education. However, traditional conceptions of representative democracy do not aspire to this ideal. Accordingly, those who pursue more meaningful involvement in the public education system seek a fragile and tenuous ideal.

A Fragile and Tenuous Ideal

As I reflected on the uneasiness that lay just under the surface of the conversation during the interviews and as I thought about the nature of the involvement that the respondent's perceived or experienced as meaningful, I concluded that this uneasiness reflected a recognition by the respondents that their notion of "meaningful involvement" was antithetical to the traditional authoritative, bureaucratic, and hierarchical structures of the public education system. Quite clearly, the kind of involvement that was experienced and perceived to be meaningful by those who initiated and participated in these networks was not consistent with the traditional organizational culture of the public education system.

According to the respondents, meaningful involvement was impossible to attain and sustain unless a belief in public participation in public education was held by all those who had a stake in the success of the system. As one network chairperson explained, "You have to have all of the parties in the process buy into the process itself or I think you're doomed to failure." Tonn and Petrich (1998) advise that "mental models" of governance "must be shared by others, in the cultural sense, or else behaviors will be disjointed, disorganized, and/or inappropriate" (p.87). However, mental models of public education as a collaborative endeavor, which include parents and citizens as active participants in the democratic decision-making processes that take place throughout the system, are not commonly held in our society today. Rather, public education is typically thought of as an essentially professional undertaking organized as an authoritarian bureaucratic hierarchy.

To complicate things further, as Teurfs explains, "'we do not form strongly held beliefs and attitudes alone. Usually they were handed down to us through the culture'" (as cited in Weiler, 1994, p.9). It appears, then, unless we examine our cultural beliefs and assumptions together it will be extraordinarily hard to change the values and beliefs which

sustain our mental models of governance of the public education system. However, the opportunities and the skills needed to examine our cultural beliefs and assumptions together about the way we govern public education are lacking in western democratic societies. What is unique about these networks of school councils is that they did provide an opportunity for such an examination to occur by creating spaces for such conversations to occur.

Nevertheless, this study suggests that opportunity alone is not sufficient to enable the necessary changes in attitudes and beliefs about how public education should be governed. As Ellinor and Gerard (1998) point out, weaving the qualities of collaboration and partnership into traditional bureaucratic hierarchies and organizations requires more than opportunity. It also requires knowledge and skill. According to Ellinor and Gerard, attempts to weave collaboration and partnership into an organization "can seem like mixing water and oil. We do not know how to do it" (p.11). So instead of embracing the opportunity that school councils and networks of school councils present to weave collaboration and partnership into the traditional bureaucratic hierarchies of the public education system, this study suggests that the tendency is to think of them as yet another layer in the educational bureaucratic hierarchy and to conceive of them as representative hierarchical bureaucratic organizations.

However, the respondents in this study were very clear that these networks of school councils were not intended to become another layer in the bureaucratic organization of the jurisdiction, nor were they intended to be organized as a bureaucratic hierarchy.

> The process was to involve school councils and parents at the school level so that they could have an opportunity to voice their opinion on things–not just create another bureaucratic organization that would pretend or have the pretense of always representing their views. We didn't want to do that.

As Golarz and Golarz (1995) point out we simply add to the harm that is done to children and communities if we continue to create and implement representative hierarchical bureaucratic organizations.

> We cannot express too strongly our conviction–based on years of study, experience, and observation–that replacing the old bureaucratic structure with a new local one will fail to provide the authentic and broad participation required for long-lasting change and true improvement. We

> urge the communities of professional educators and concerned citizens to do all they can to correct this misguided trend and to make whatever efforts are necessary to prevent this approach from becoming part of their efforts to build a viable approach to reform. (p.6)

In addition to not knowing how to effectively weave the qualities of collaboration and partnership into our traditional bureaucracies, another barrier to change is that many of those who hold the power, authority and control in traditional bureaucratic hierarchies simply do not want to change or are threatened by the prospect of change. As Eisler (1995) points out, historically, when attempts are made to move from hierarchical authoritarian social structures to more collaborative partnership models they have been extremely vulnerable to attempts to co-opt the new partnership structures to maintain the old hierarchies of domination (p.460).

So, it seems that the traditional cultural attitudes and beliefs held about bureaucratic hierarchies and representative democracies, in combination with the lack of necessary skills, opportunities, and desire to weave the qualities of collaboration and partnership into the traditional bureaucratic hierarchies of the public education system, makes meaningful involvement a fragile and tenuous ideal.

This study suggests that these networks of school councils provide the opportunity to weave the qualities of collaboration and partnership into the traditional representative hierarchical bureaucracies of the public education system. However, this study also suggests that the mental models we collectively hold about the public education system serve as forceful barriers to the implementation of networks of school councils that actually enable meaningful involvement. Thus, it seems, that until such time as we have collectively shifted our thinking and collectively hold mental models of public education as a shared responsibility, meaningful involvement will remain a fragile and tenuous ideal.

Discussion

Emerging from the examination of the findings of this study, an analysis of the essential elements of "meaningful involvement," and an overview of the literature on participatory governance was the realization that the dissatisfaction and frustration that led

to the establishment of these networks of school councils stemmed, not from the original umbrella groups per se, but from the practice of representative democracy itself.

As I reflected on the role that these networks of school councils played and on the elements of involvement that were perceived or experienced as meaningful I concluded that the overall effect of these networks of school councils was to enable a "more hybrid system of governance" (Snauwaert, 1993). Snauwaert describes this as a participatory system of governance "wherein policy would emerge from the bottom up, informed and crafted by direct participation in a deliberative process. This process would in turn provide an opportunity for the development of informed educational participants" (p.104). This, it appears, was the intent of these networks of school councils, and in the jurisdiction where the network was enabled by policy, was in actual practice, the effect of this network.

Upon further reflection, I was struck by the similarities between the themes which emerged as the essential elements of meaningful involvement and Barber's conception of strong democracy.

> Strong democracy is defined by politics in the participatory mode: literally, it is self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens. Active citizens govern themselves directly here, not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is being deployed. Self-government is carried on through institutions designed to facilitate ongoing civic participation in agenda-setting, deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation (in the form of "common work"). Strong democracy does not place endless faith in the capacity of individuals to govern themselves, but it affirms with Machiavelli that the multitude will on the whole be as wise as or even wiser than princes and with Theodore Roosevelt that the majority of the plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any, smaller body of men will make in trying to govern them. (1984, p.150)

Barber (1998) also maintains that the mental model that is most often held in traditional western democracies does not conceive of democracy as strong democracy, that is, as politics in the participatory mode, but conceives of democracy as thin democracy, that is, as politics in the representative mode. "We have become accustomed to thinking of politics as a spectator sport and of citizenship as a passive, watchdog function that is exercised only episodically in the election of those who actually govern in the name of

"'We the People'" (p.72). Accordingly, he asserts that in most western democracies, because they are representative democracies, most citizens are "passive, apathetic, inactive and generally uninterested in things public" and they have no "sense of themselves as citizens" (1984, p.228).

As I thought about these two different conceptions of democracy, it seemed to me that the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study suggest a conception of democracy as politics in the participatory mode, whereas, the original school council umbrella groups suggest a conception of democracy as politics in the representative mode. Thus it seems that "meaningful involvement" requires conditions and processes that enable politics in the participatory mode. Accordingly, this study suggests that meaningful involvement is not possible when the conditions and processes of the institution or organization reflect a conception of politics in the representative mode.

It appears that before meaningful involvement can become a reality for parents, community members, and students who serve on school councils, the governance structures of the public education system will have to be recreated to enable politics in the participatory mode. Traditionally, western democratic societies have governed under a system of representative democracy. Accordingly, the conditions and processes necessary for participation in the democratic decision-making processes are often missing from the political institutions, and the institutions that govern public education are no exception. Indeed, those who became frustrated and dissatisfied with the traditional school council umbrella groups certainly seemed to have perceived it this way.

It appears that those who initiated and participated in these networks of school councils were trying to put in place institutional innovations to enable politics in the participatory mode in the governance of public education. The need for such innovative structures was recognized by the Minister's Forum on School Councils. In their final report they recommend that "school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Council within their districts" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.16).

> Establishing Councils of School Councils would provide school councils within a district with the opportunity to share their best practices. It also would allow school councils to develop common positions on matters of common interest and aid in communicating those positions to their board of education. Such Councils of Councils already exist in several areas of

> the province. A number of school councils identified this approach as one of the "best practices" which helped make them highly effective. (1999, p.16)

Barber (1998) advises that the kinds of institutional innovations that are required to make this shift point toward the need "for an even more critical kind of innovation: a change in attitude" (p. 55). Certainly, this was the perception of those who participated in this study. Unless a belief in public participation in the public education system was shared by the professionals and the trustees as well as by the parents, community members, and students who served on school councils, involvement that was experienced or perceived to be meaningful, simply was not possible.

This need for a change in attitude was also recognized by the Minister's Forum on School Councils. They found that differences of opinion existed about the role that school councils should play between school council members who were principals and teachers and school council members who were parents, community representatives or students: "Parents and community representatives appeared to want more involvement than desired by principals and teachers in areas such as budgeting decisions, facilities use, student achievement, student discipline, staffing priorities and recruitment decisions, [and] programs offered"(Alberta Learning, 1999, p.10). They also found that differences of opinion existed between school boards and school councils about the nature of the involvement available to school councils: "School boards indicated school councils had a higher degree of involvement in education than councils themselves generally thought they did" (p.11). As well they found that school councils wanted to have more authentic opportunities for involvement in the decision-making processes:

> In addition to wanting more involvement in the areas cited in recommendation #2, [student achievement, budgeting, facility use, programs, policies]many participants at the public meetings indicated they did not believe their involvement in these areas had any real impact on the decisions which were made. For example, some participants indicated that they were shown proposed school budgets, but felt the actual opportunity for input had passed. (1999, p.16)

Thus it appears that this requirement for a change in attitude about the way we practice democracy in western democratic societies accounts for the tenuous and fragile

nature of meaningful involvement. This study suggests that, as long as we continue to characterize the governance of public education as politics in the representative mode, rather than as politics in the participatory mode, meaningful involvement will, indeed, remain a fragile and tenuous ideal. Golarz and Golarz (1995) advise that the move to participatory governance within the public education system is not an easy transition,

> Making educational decisions through participatory governance impacts all levels of a community. To move toward such a democratic and inclusive process brings some confusion, often resentment, and always resistance as the security of old ways of thinking and functioning are challenged and altered. To engage in this process of change, participants must be willing to learn through study and the observation of communities where such processes are demonstrating success. The process of participatory governance requires building high levels of trust where formerly there was little. It is a process that requires patience, persistence, and support at the highest levels of bureaucracy and a willingness on the part of all to take risks, share power, and be accountable. (p.12)

In conclusion, it appears that the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study were intended to serve as "institutional innovations" that would enable active citizen participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system. According to Mathews, this cultivates citizens who are committed to a common goal.

> Private individuals become citizens by making decisions about the issues that most concern them and affect their common well-being. Making common choices is work that, if done well–that is, with due deliberation–cultivates a sense of public responsibility. We feel more responsible for what we've participated in choosing than for what has been chosen for us. Choices also make public action possible; we can't work together until we decide what to work at. Most of all, making choices together identifies the shared or interconnected purposes that join people as a public.(1997, p.742)

This study suggests that participation in these networks fostered as sense of commitment amongst those who participated in these networks, towards the common goal of a public education system that educates all children and youth well. It appears that those who served on school councils and participated in these networks thought of themselves as public citizens who had a responsibility to contribute to the education of the children and youth who attended public schools within the jurisdiction.

Thus it seems that these networks provided the opportunity for the "common citizen" to contribute to the "common good" of those students served by the public education system. However, participation in these networks was limited to employees of the jurisdiction, trustees of the jurisdiction, and school council members from within the jurisdiction. Those citizens who were taxpayers and voters–but who did not serve in one of these roles–did not participate in these networks. In addition, classroom teachers did not usually participate in these networks of school councils. As a result, the voice of the classroom teacher was often absent in the deliberations of the network. Thus, these networks did not extend the opportunity for public participation in the governance of public education to all citizens and taxpayers. Accordingly, other mechanisms or approaches will also have to be provided–either as part of the networks or in addition to these networks of school councils– if we are to fully realize the goal of participatory governance of the public education system.

Concluding Comments

As we enter the third millennium, if there is one thing that public education needs, it is a public who feels a sense of responsibility and commitment towards it and who express a willingness to serve as citizens for its betterment. Yet, those who perceive themselves to be such citizens and wish to serve public education in this capacity have traditionally been relegated to the role of "handmaiden"–that is, deciding on white chocolate or dark, bingos or casinos–rather than being offered authentic opportunities to serve as citizens in deliberations about public education. This study offers hope that this is changing, as it provides an example of one jurisdiction which has made the shift from politics in the representative mode to politics in the participatory mode and provides another example of a jurisdiction that is caught in the throes of this shift. However, as Anderson (1998) points out, such occurrences within the public education arena are all too rare.

> At this juncture, we are seeing some disillusionment in participatory strategies and an openness to antipolitical solutions, such as parental school choice in quasi-markets. The choice before us seems to be whether to deepen our notions of participation toward stronger forms of democratic participation or abandon participation as a reform strategy. Given the tendency of reforms to cycle in and out of favor, it may be some time before

> a discourse of participation reappears on the scene (Cuban, 1990) and, by the time it does, public schools may be a thing of the past. For this reason, it is imperative to develop the conceptual tools to understand the way a discourse of participation either fails to result in empowered constituencies or ends up promoting nondemocratic ends. (p.595)

This study also serves as yet another warning for those who choose to ignore the critical need that public education has for an actively engaged, committed and supportive public. Those who are working to achieve meaningful involvement in the public education system, but who are dissatisfied and frustrated with their attempts to do so, (as was the case with some of the respondents in this study) will not persist for long. They will soon tire and lose hope, as effecting change can be a tireless and thankless undertaking. They will join the ranks of parents who either move their children to private or charter schools or who focus their efforts on their individual children rather than on the common needs of all of society's children. In doing so they will join the ranks of parents who have simply given up hope of having any meaningful role to play and begin to count the number of years before their youngest child graduates and they no longer have to contend with the public education system. When they do, once again the responsibility for public education will fall upon the teachers, and, as they so passionately pointed out in *Trying to Teach* (Alberta Teachers' Association, 1993), they can no longer do this job alone.

If the public education system is serious about "Fostering Educated and Active Citizens" (Osborne, 1999) then we will have to recognize that, while this work begins in our classrooms and in our public schools, it must also continue upon graduation. In order to do so, the public education system will have to make room for educated and active citizen participation in its democratic decision-making processes. What is the point of fostering educated and active citizens if our public institutions, such as public schools and public school boards, do not seek out, welcome and support active citizen participation once our public schools have inspired this ideal? As McKnight (1999) so clearly points out, this approach leads to disaffected and apathetic citizens.

> As we think about ourselves, our community, our institutions, many of us recognize that we have been degraded because our roles as citizens and our communities have been traded in for the right to clienthood and consumer status. Many of us have come to recognize that as we exiled our fallible neighbors to the control of managers, therapists, and technicians we lost

> much power to be the vital center of society. We forgot about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work and, instead, made some of us into the objects of good works–servants of those who serve.
>
> As we think about our community life, we recognize that something has happened to many of us as institutions have grown in power; we have become too impotent to be called real citizens and too disconnected to be effective members of community. (p.9)

This study offers some insight into the nature of involvement that could enable us to be called real citizens and to connect us together again so that all members of the school community have genuine and authentic opportunities to serve as informed, deliberative, active, and effective participants in a public education system committed to the common goal of educating all children and youth well. This study also offers some insights about the ways networks of school councils could enable this kind of meaningful involvement. This study suggests that public education will have to be reconceptualized as a shared responsibility rather than as an essentially professional undertaking, and the governance of public education will have to be reconceptualized as governance in the participatory mode, rather than as governance in the representative mode, to realize this tenuous and fragile ideal.

On the surface, it seems obvious that a strong system of public education requires an engaged and committed public. Furthermore, it seems obvious that, if given the choice, people would embrace any opportunity that presented itself to further the commitment of the public towards the public education system. However, the research to date has shown that, in actual practice, authentic participation and meaningful involvement are rare occurrences in the public education arena. This study shows that even though rare, it is possible, if a commitment towards public participation in public education becomes embedded throughout the jurisdiction. This study also shows how enormously frustrating it can be for those who are trying to further authentic participation and meaningful involvement, in the absence of such a commitment.

For the sake of educating all children well, we can only hope that we will acquire a better understanding of how to make the shift from politics in the representative mode to politics in the participatory mode before we have gone so far with our marketization and

privatization reform efforts, that there is no turning back. If we fail to do so, public schools may simply become another consumer service embedded in a market economy. Equitable opportunity for the success of all children as learners, if it ever existed, will become a thing of the past. In the words of one respondent:

> The question must be asked: How can you make decisions without involving those affected, in a collaborative process? We are sitting on the sidelines watching the democratic process occur without our participation. If schools and boards do not put in good democratic processes to involve school councils and communities, the only other option for parents and students is choice–a movement to the market model of education–and parents will exercise it. . . . it is my firm belief that if a strong and vital public education system is to continue to exist, we must begin talking to one another, respecting one another, listening to one another, walking with one another.

This study suggests that networks of school councils which enable authentic, enlightened, deliberative, active, and effective citizen participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system and which provide systematic and structured opportunities for public dialogue about public education may serve as one means to enable us to make this shift.

Recommendations

- Recommendation 1: Mandate Councils of School Councils.

  The Minister's Forums on School Councils M. L. A. Working Group recommended "that school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Councils within their districts" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.4). While this is a step in the right direction it is doubtful that it will bring about the necessary changes to enable *authentic* participation by school councils in the governance of the public education system. There is much evidence to show that participatory reforms frequently fail to enable authentic participation. Furthermore, the M. L. A. Working Group reported that a difference of opinion exists between school boards and school councils about the nature of involvement accorded school councils: school boards reported that school councils had more involvement than school councils reported (p.11). Therefore, it is questionable if simply "encouraging" school boards to establish Councils of School Councils will be

sufficient to enable authentic participation of parents and other members of the school council in the public education system.

It may well be that the Government of Alberta will have to do more than simply "encourage" school boards to move in this direction. It may well be that the same approach which was taken to implement school councils will also have to be taken to implement networks of school councils. That is, Councils of School Councils will have to be mandated before school boards will take them seriously. Accordingly, the Government of Alberta should not simply encourage school boards to establish Councils of School Councils rather, they should *require* them to hold establishment meetings for Councils of School Councils in the same way that they required school principals to hold annual establishment meetings for school councils until a school council had been established for each school. Therefore, the Government of Alberta should:

1. Require school boards to hold an annual establishment meeting for a Council(s) of School Councils until a Council(s) of School Councils has been established for each school jurisdiction. The Council(s) of School Councils would serve as a means to enable school councils to :
    a) provide advice to the school board on board philosophies, policies, plans, programs, priorities, and budgets;
    b) share information and discuss educational matters with other school councils in the jurisdiction;
    c) enhance communication amongst the school councils, the superintendent; the school board, and the community;
    d) provide an opportunity for school councils to collectively provide advice to the school board and the Government of Alberta.

2. Implement legislation and regulations to guide the operation and functioning of the Councils of School Councils and to enable authentic participation of the school councils who participate in these organizations. Accordingly, such regulations should stipulate that:

i) each school board shall consult with the school councils in their jurisdiction to develop a policy that enables the implementation of a Council(s) of School Councils that is agreed to by a majority of the school councils in the jurisdiction;

ii) each school council may be represented on the Council of School Councils if it so chooses;

iii) each Superintendent and chair of the Board of Trustees or designate(s) shall serve as liaison to the Council of School Councils;

iv) each school council designate shall be a voting member of the Council of School Councils and members of the Board of Trustees and the Superintendent or designate(s) shall be non-voting members of the Council of School Councils;

v) each network will hold an organizational meeting no later than 60 days after the start of the school year;

vi) the membership of the Council of School Councils shall choose a chair and other officers desired from among the voting members;

vii) the school councils, the board of trustees, and administration may forward items for inclusion on meeting agendas to the chair who shall establish meeting agendas and shall chair the meetings;

viii) each network shall be small enough in size to enable democratic dialogue and deliberation by the network members, thirty school councils shall be the maximum number of school councils who participate in a Council of School Councils;

ix) each network will stipulate a minimum time frame that will enable the school council representatives, who participate in the network, to adequately consult with their school councils and school communities before providing input or feedback to the board of trustees;

x) each school board shall provide all available relevant information (with the exception of personnel and private student records and in accordance with FOIPP) in a timely manner upon the request of the Council of

School Councils or one of their designated school council representatives;

xi) each school board shall provide the necessary financial resources to enable the Councils of School Councils to function, including resources for professional development for those who participate in the network.

- Recommendation 2: Implement School Councils and Councils of School Councils as vehicles for participation and collaboration.

School councils and Councils of School Councils offer the most hope for school improvement and a more truly democratic politics when they are viewed as neither advisory nor decision-making, but instead, are viewed as vehicles to weave participation, collaboration, and partnership into the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system. If we are to further involvement in the public education system that is in any way meaningful it is necessary to put an end to the academic and political debates, which are ongoing, about whether or not school councils should be advisory or decision-making. Instead, we should focus on the possibilities they hold for enabling participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system. Accordingly, the Government of Alberta, in partnership with school boards, should:

1. Provide school councils and Councils of School Councils with the necessary resources and support to enable them to be implemented as vehicles for collaboration and participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system.

2. Avoid implementing school councils and Councils of School Councils as another layer in the education bureaucracy and avoid implementing them as a bureaucratic hierarchy. To this end it is critical to heed Golarz and Golarz's (1995) warning that:

> Neither the effective schools research nor the IDEA process model supports the notion of creating new local school bureaucracies. In fact, the creation of such entities would be

> contrary to all of the tested and proven research. Participatory governance teams can only find their legitimate functioning if their efforts enhance true and extensive involvement and ownership. Those involved in this process of change must see their primary charge as one of promoting greater autonomy and involvement in the decision-making process. Those who initiate change by creating new local bureaucracies that only involve a few people simply add to the harm that is done to children and communities. (pp. 3-4)

3. Provide leadership training programs through universities, district inservicing, and the regional consortia which focus on helping prospective and current principals, trustees, school council chairpersons, and Council of School Councils chairpersons to acquire the necessary skills needed to further authentic participation and meaningful involvement in the public education system. Organizations such as the *International Association for Public Participation*, *The Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs*, and *Alberta Community Development* could serve as valuable resources in the development of such programs.

- Recommendation 3: Require School Boards to have "public participation policies."

The legitimacy of school boards has seriously been called into question during this past decade. Attempts by boards to further meaningful involvement in their democratic decision-making processes could restore that legitimacy. In addition to mandating "Councils of School Councils" the Government of Alberta should require school boards to implement policy that specifies how it will enable all citizens in the constituency to be involved in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. Such policy should uphold the *International Association for Public Participation's Core Values For Public Participation:*

a) The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.
b) Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

c) The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants.
d) The public participation process actively seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.
e) The public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate.
f) The public participation process provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
g) The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

- Recommendation 4: Implement education reforms that promote democratic ends.

In an attempt to reform Alberta's public education system, considerable emphasis is now being placed on the extension of school choice, increased support for private schools, and the importance of achievement tests to monitor the effectiveness of the public education system. Such reforms reflect a conception of parents and children as clients or consumers and a conception of public education as a consumer good or service. This is occurring regardless of a substantive body of research which shows that participatory reforms which reflect a conception of parents and students as partners, and schools as communities, hold the most promise for enhancing student success. Accordingly, the Government of Alberta should allocate more resources towards implementing, supporting, and evaluating participatory reforms such as school councils, Councils of School Councils and partnerships between families, schools and communities. Centres, such as the proposed Centre for School-Family-Community Partnerships in Learning at the University of Alberta, could assist in the implementation and evaluation of such participatory reforms and should be supported, not only by all those who ideologically would prefer the implementation of educational reform that seeks democratic ends, but also by all those who wish to enhance student success and foster school improvement.

- Recommendation 5: Model participatory governance.

  Public schools are the basis upon which our forebearers sought to ensure the continuation of a strong democratic society. Democracy is an evolving concept and the role that public education has to play in furthering this evolution, both in our schools and in our communities, should not be underestimated. Currently, the mental governance models that most members of western democratic societies hold, typically reflect an understanding of democracy as representative. It is unlikely that we can make a collective shift from representative to participatory mental models of governance simply because some one tells us we should. To make this transition, people will need to experience participatory democracy before they can adequately assess it effectiveness or appreciate its benefits. Educational organizations such as the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta School Boards' Association, and the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, to name a few, should ensure that their organizational governance structures provide genuine opportunities for authentic participation, by their membership, in their democratic decision-making processes. In doing so, they would model participatory democratic decision-making processes for schools, school boards and school councils throughout Alberta. If Alberta's public education system is to make the transition from hierarchy and control to participation and collaboration, it will require a collective shift in everyone's thinking–teachers, parents, principals, students, other staff, trustees, bureaucrats, politicians and members of the school community at large. Models of participatory governance could facilitate this shift in thinking.

- Recommendation 6: Further study is needed:
  1. To better understand how to enable authentic participation and meaningful involvement in the public education system through participation in school councils and networks of school councils.

  2. To better understand how to effectively implement school councils and networks of school councils which integrate participation, collaboration, and partnership into the traditional bureaucratic hierarchies of the public education

system. In particular, it is necessary to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by school principals, teachers, school council chairpersons, superintendents, system administrators, and school trustees to enable broad citizen participation in deliberations about public education.

3. To better understand how to extend opportunities for authentic participation and meaningful involvement in the public education system to *all* citizens–not just those who participate in school councils and networks of school councils as described in this study.

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APPENDIX A: SECTION 17 OF THE SCHOOL ACT

School Councils

17 (1) A school council shall be established in accordance with the regulations for each school operated by a board.

(2) The majority of the members of a school council shall be parents of students enrolled in the school board.

(3) A board of a separate school district or a division made up only of separate school districts, by resolution, may require that the parents of students enrolled in a school operated by the board who are members of the school council must also be of the same faith as those who established the separate school districts, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic.

(4) A school council may, at its discretion,

(a) advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school,

(b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board in accordance with the delegation

(c) consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister,

(d) consult with the principals so that the principals may ensure that the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent, and

(e) do anything it is authorized under the regulations to do.

(5) Subject to the regulations, a school council may develop and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its functions.

(6) A school council may make by-laws governing its meetings and the conduct of its affairs.

(7) Subject to the regulations, a board may develop and implement policies respecting school councils.

(7.1) A board shall establish an appeal process or conflict resolution procedure under which the principal or the school council may apply respecting disputes on policies proposed or adopted for a school.

(8) The Minister, on the request of the board, may dissolve a school council without notice at any time if the Minister is of the opinion that the school council is not carrying out its responsibilities in accordance with the **ACT** and the regulations.

(9) The Minister may make regulation

(a) respecting the election or appointment of the members of a school council and the term or other conditions of election or appointment and the dissolution of a school council;

(b) respecting the roles of the principals and the school council of a school and their respective powers, duties and responsibilities;

(c) respecting any other matter the Minister considers necessary respecting school councils;

(d) exempting a school or a class of schools from the application of this section.

Powers of Boards

44(1) A board must

(b) in respect of its operations

(i) keep in force a policy or policies of insurance,

(ii) with the approval of the Minister, participate in an arrangement under Par 15 of the *insurance Act,* or

(iii) with the approval of the Minister, participate in an alternative arrangement acceptable to the Minister,

for the purpose of indemnifying the board and its employees and school councils in respect of claims for

(iv) damages for death or personal injury,

(v) damages to property, and

(vi) damages to property owned by the board in respect of which the board has an insurable interest

(A) that the board has agreed to insure, or

(B) for which the board otherwise has or may have assumed liability, in an amount and form prescribed by the Minister;

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. First, I'd be interested in knowing what your role is in the network of school councils?
2. Tell me about the network of school councils: What led to its development? What purpose does it serve? Who attends the meetings? How are they chosen? When do you meet? Where do you meet? How often do you meet? Who sets the agendas for the meetings? How is that determined? What happens after the meetings? Who has the responsibility for conducting the affairs of the network?
3. Generally speaking, has participation in the school council network had any effect on your school council? on your school? on your school district? on you? on others? Please elaborate.
4. In your opinion, has participation in the school council network been beneficial, in any way, for you, for your school council, for your school, for your school district, for others? Please elaborate.
5. In your opinion, has participation in the school council network enabled your school council / school / school district to meaningfully involve parents and members of the school community in the education of the children through participation on school councils? Please elaborate.
6. In your opinion, has participation in the school council network enabled you to be meaningfully involved in the education of the children? Please elaborate.
7. Generally speaking, do you have any concerns about the network of school councils? Please elaborate.
8. In your opinion, do you think participation in the network of school councils has been detrimental in any way, for you, for your school council, for your school, for your district, for others? Please elaborate.
9. Form your experience, what features or characteristics, if any, of the network of school councils, enables it to fulfill its role effectively? Please elaborate.
10. From your experience, what features or characteristics, if any, of the network of school councils make it difficult for it to fulfill its role effectively? Please elaborate.
11. If you had the opportunity to change anything you wanted about the school council network what would you change? Please elaborate.
12. Are there any additional comments you would like to make about the network of school councils?

Thank you.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Dear Study Participant:

My name is Lynn Odynski, I am a graduate student in the Master of Educational Administration Program in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. As part of the master's degree requirements I am conducting research on the development of school council networks and the perceived effects of participation in such networks. I believe that such information can be of assistance to others who may be interested in school councils.

Specifically, I seek responses to the following questions:

1. Does participation in a network of school councils build collective understanding and meaning, among the various participants, as to the role of the school council in facilitating meaningful involvement by parents and members of the school community in the education of children?

2. Does participation in a network of school councils facilitate the development of school councils which have the capacity to further meaningful involvement by parents and members of the school community in the education of children?

3. Does participation in a network of school councils further the meaningful involvement of parents and members of a school community in the education of children?

4. What other effects, if any, result from participation in a network of school councils?

To conduct this research, I plan to interview a number of individuals from two different school jurisdictions, who participate in school council networks. I am seeking your permission to interview you for this study.

The interview will require about one hour to complete. The interview will be tape recorded to reduce some possible sources of error in my data collection. The interview will be transcribed and the transcripts from the interview will be returned to you to review, comment on, or revise in order to ensure that the information obtained in the interview accurately reflects your views. You will also be provided with a copy of the initial data analysis in order to ensure that my interpretation of the data accurately reflects your views.

The information you provide to me will be confidential. The consent forms, audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure place. The tape and the transcript will be identified by a code known only to myself. Your name will not appear on the tape of this interview, on the transcript of this interview, or in the written report of this study. I plan to use pseudonyms in the transcript and in the written report of this study. I will not identify you, the school, the school council, the network, or the school district in this

study. I will conduct the interviews myself and no one else will know how you - or anyone else - answered the interview questions.

If you decide that you no longer wish to participate in this study you may withdraw from the study at any time. In other words, even after the completion of the interview, if you decide that you do not want this information used in the study, and advise me of your decision prior to the completion of the study, I will not use it and the transcript and the tape will be returned to you.

This research complies with the University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Educational Policy Studies. It also complies with the Cooperative Activities Program Agreement and has been approved by the Office of the Dean of the Faulty of Education. My advisor for this study is Dr. Margaret Haughey.

If you have any other questions or comments regarding your participation this study please do not hesitate to contact either myself, or my advisor, Dr. Margaret Haughey as follows:

Lynn Odynski
13708 - 101 Avenue
Edmonton, AB, T5N 0J7
PH: 454-5873 FAX: 452-1823
email: odynski@ccinet.ab.ca

Dr. Margaret Haughey
Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta
PH: 492-7609
email: margaret haughey@ualberta.ca

If you wish, I would be happy to share the findings of the final study with you.

To indicate that you understand the nature of this study and your participation in it will you kindly sign the consent to participate below:

Consent to Participate

I have read the above and have discussed my participation in this study with the researcher, Lynn Odynski. I understand the nature of my participation in this study and give consent to Lynn Odynski to tape record this interview, to have this interview transcribed by a third party, and to include the information obtained from this interview in the written report of her study.

Date: _____
Name of Study Participant: _____

Signature of Study Participant: _____