



GOVERNMENT'S VIEW ON SCHOOL COUNCILS

OPSOA Speaks – April 1995

OPSOA's Response to the Government Initiative on School Councils

Although the recently announced government initiative on school councils is not based exclusively on the Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, OPSOA thinks it appropriate to respond to the initiative from within the context of that report. Unlike other reports that have addressed the issue of school councils, or school-community or school parent councils, the Report of the Royal Commission on Learning considers school councils as part of a larger picture of elementary and secondary education. Such a comprehensive view tends to be more objective. Further credibility is added to the Commission's view by the amount and diversity of input it received during the consultative process. The Commission is, in fact, extremely clear in its analysis of the most appropriate role for parents and the community in schools. In attempting to find what it calls the elusive right balance of power in addressing decision making in the education system, the Commission uses two basic questions as its criteria – Does it promote good learning and teaching? Does it put the interests of student achievement first and foremost? In achieving those goals, the Commission suggests at least three ways in which parents and the "school-community councils" can be helpful. OPSOA agrees with them.

First, because teachers must, focus on their main responsibility of providing high-quality, high level instruction, the community must help them with, the non-academic load that's been thrust on schools'. Every school must have a school-advisory council, responsible for bringing appropriate community resources into the school to assume some of the obligations teachers now bear alone.

Secondly, in discussing specifically parental involvement with schools, the Commission emphasizes the importance of establishing ways in which parents can be helped to stay actively involved in their own children's education. It makes the point that, this is a far more productive use of the often limited time and energy of most parents than being involved in sharing management responsibilities with the principal. It adds that, there's no evidence we know of to demonstrate that it (parental involvement in school management) improves kid's learning. In this context, the Commission recommends the creation of a charter of parents' rights and responsibilities and suggests that, schools would

benefit significantly if the views and concerns of parents were solicited in a regular and significant way.

Finally, and related to the solicitation of parental views and concerns, the Commission suggests that the school–community council would "inevitably and reasonably" assume an advisory role to the principal "on general matters relating to the improving of the school". This would confirm the councils as "the school's main structural link with the community". OPSOA supports this framework for the development of school councils. In large part the government initiative that was announced on February 10, 1995 also seems to have its base within this context. Inasmuch as it does, OPSOA commends the government and supports the initiative. In fact, the initiative would seem to replicate the development of school councils that has already occurred in many boards throughout the province. OPSOA hopes that the specific observations and suggestions that follow will assist the government in the task of fleshing out the details.

PRIMARY ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNCILS

Recognizing that education is a shared responsibility between the school and the community, the primary role of school councils should be: to bring community resources to bear as required; to ensure that parents recognize and exercise their right to participate in the education of their children; and to serve the principal and the school in an advisory capacity. It will be necessary in defining their role to articulate clearly the relationship of school councils to the other players in the governance structure (ie. boards, supervisory officers and the Ministry). For instance, if the role of school councils includes advising boards, what formal status should they have at board meetings? Etc. Many such relationship questions will have to be addressed.

ROLE OF SUPERVISORY OFFICERS

OPSOA believes that there is a role for supervisory officers in the functioning of school councils, not necessarily as direct participants but when required as third party interveners. A mechanism, procedure or appeal process will be required from time to time, for instance to assist councils in dealing with special interest groups that attempt to monopolize agendas or to help councils that have themselves begun to address concerns, such as personnel issues, that are outside their jurisdiction. Supervisory officers are well positioned, with the requisite expertise, to assist school councils in circumstances such as these.

SCHOOL COUNCIL PROTOCOL

Presumably, the School Council Handbook will establish a protocol or a set of guidelines for the functioning of school councils. It needs to do more than provide "information and suggestions" for establishing and operating school councils. It should provide guidance to schools and boards by defining such things as the limits of the school council mandate, minimum membership, parent election procedures, community representative selection procedures, the

size and composition of a quorum, a process for removing inactive or obstructive members from the council, budgeting and auditing procedures, etc. The local board should have a role as well in assisting school councils to establish common terms of reference that provide some consistency from council to council within the board's jurisdiction. Each board must also be allowed to ensure that such terms of reference are not contrary to its own established policies and procedures. OPSOA, many of whose members have already been involved in helping to establish school councils, is willing to participate and/or to suggest members of existing school councils who would be willing to assist with this task.

MEMBERSHIP

The minimum requirements of membership seem reasonable. In those schools that have a student representative, that have the minimum of two community representatives, and that have, as they must, a majority of parents, the school council would consist of a minimum of 13 people. Schools councils will have to guard against becoming too large to function effectively. The requirement that there be a parent majority could cause this to happen if additional community, student or staff representatives were appointed by the council. On the other hand, there may well be situations in which very small schools in the same community should be allowed to combine their school councils. A measure of flexibility in its membership requirements would serve the school council concept well. The nature of the forum required to elect parent representatives is critical and should be defined. Other membership concerns such as ensuring that distinctive populations are recognized, that ward or area representation is provided where appropriate, and that there are Catholic representatives for secondary schools in non extended Boards need to be considered, as well. Schools must ensure that their school councils are truly representative of the social and economic differences within their communities.

OPSOA believes that elected school board trustees should not be voting members of school councils. Their participation as voting members could well create conflict of interest situations for them. Their attendance at school council meetings so that they can serve a liaison function with the Board, however, could be productive of a close collaborative relationship between the two bodies.

WHAT SCHOOL COUNCILS WILL DO

OPSOA believes it is critical that the strictly advisory nature of the school council mandate be underlined. Presumably the advice will be provided only in those areas in which the Board has some discretion (eg. in the Board's 10% share of curriculum decisions). In areas like curriculum and program priorities and assessment and accountability, clarification of the respective roles of the Ministry, Boards, schools and school councils will be necessary. Such clarification prior to the initiation of school councils will ensure that school council advice is channelled and productive. In the selection of principals

OPSOA believes that boards should invite school councils to assist in the development of general leadership criteria for the selection of principals and, in specific selection situations, to advise the selection team on any local criteria required to meet local school needs. The actual selection and appointment process and any subsequent performance review process must be Board functions. However, Boards should be free to decide if they wish to have school council members sitting on Board selection committees. OPSOA strongly supports school council involvement in an advisory capacity in: establishing school budget priorities; involving community support agencies and other community members in schools; establishing the school code of behaviour; and determining the community use of school facilities. It will be critical to ensure that school councils understand the constraints within which schools and boards operate, particularly the financial ones. Fiscal responsibility will still rest with the school and the board.

FINANCIAL ISSUES

The source of funding for school councils needs to be defined. Additional board funding for this or any other initiative is very problematic in the present climate. Certainly, a start-up grant from the Ministry for councils would be a welcome goodwill gesture. The right of the school council to raise funds for its own purposes should be addressed as well. And, as indicated earlier, school council budgeting and auditing procedures should be components of any protocol or guideline.

IN-SERVICE REQUIREMENTS

Because principals will be critical players in the successful functioning of school councils and because they may not all have the skills and attitudes to function in the collaborative mode required by the school council concept, OPSOA recommends that full-day training sessions, accessible throughout the province, be provided for principals and any other staff participants. This could be done in June or September, prior to the required implementation of the councils, with short follow-up sessions throughout the first year. The School Council Forum suggested for the spring of 1996 could serve as one component of the in-service.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

It is important that a statement of rights and responsibilities for parents and students be congruent with what presently exists in legislation for parents, students, teachers and principals. The relationships need to be complementary.