

# CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITY & CREATING WELCOMING SCHOOLS THE 2010 REPORT ON ONTARIO'S SCHOOL COUNCILS

People for Education

The 2010 Report on Ontario's School Councils



CONNECTING  
WITH COMMUNITY  
& CREATING  
WELCOMING SCHOOLS

THE 2010 REPORT  
ON ONTARIO'S  
SCHOOL  
COUNCILS

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# ONTARIO'S SCHOOL COUNCILS



# INTRODUCTION

***We all agree on school council that we have an overall wonderful school spirit, thanks to the leadership of a wonderful principal and an amazing community with broad parent/staff involvement. We also believe that the size of the school is conducive to networking and encourages familiarity and comfort levels that enable communication.***

School Council Chair, Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB

For the past thirteen years, People for Education has conducted surveys of schools to gather information about staff, services, and programs. Last year, we piloted a new survey specifically for school councils.

The survey asks about the role of school councils and the communication tools they use, board level parent involvement, school council funding and fundraising. The information gathered will help to provide a better understanding of school councils and the work they do to support their school communities.

This year, over 950 councils from 67 school boards completed the survey; these results will be used as a baseline for future reports. Survey participation reflects not only the regional distribution of schools across the province, but also the proportional split between secondary and elementary schools.

The survey results show that parents and school council members across the province are working tirelessly to support their local schools, not only for their own children, but for the good of the entire community. They show a deep commitment to public education and a willingness to support their local schools through their work. Many respondents took the time to describe their activities and programs in great detail, and demonstrated a justifiable pride in the work they do.

But the results also showed significant disconnects—between current provincial school council policy and what school councils actually now consider their most important roles; between parent engagement policy and what research tells us about what makes the greatest difference for individual student success; and between parents' calls in 2005<sup>1</sup> for more effective communications from the province and the reality we are finding in 2010.

Among the findings from the survey:

- The majority of school councils list enhancing communication as their most important role, but they report they spend the most time on fundraising.
- New provincial policy mandates that every board has a Parent Involvement Committee (PIC). While two-thirds of schools reported they knew about their board's PIC, 41% didn't know how parents got to be on the committee.
- 84% of councils report that their principals always or often notify them about education policy changes; 59% say they hear about changes from their school boards, and 34% report the Ministry of Education notifies them always or often.
- 89% of schools fundraise. Of those, 53% raise money for library books, 61% for art and music, and 56% for computers, text books or classroom supplies.

New provincial policy shows that the provincial government plans to rely more heavily on Parent Involvement Committees and School Councils to provide a link between the province and the local level. As a result, it will be increasingly important that schools councils and Parent Involvement Committees have the mandate, tools and resources available to ensure that they are able to meet this expectation.

Policy covering the role of school councils may need to be adjusted in a number of ways: to support a new emphasis on communication; to reflect research which shows unequivocally that it is parents' involvement with their children at home that has the greatest impact on student achievement; and to assist councils in managing their role as fundraisers for their schools.

Parents have a huge amount to contribute to their children's success, to their local schools, and to the dialogue about education policy. The most important task now is to ensure that all of our policy and practice provides support that is useful, prevents parent involvement from becoming an onerous task, and lays the groundwork for an inclusive, welcoming environment in our schools and in our education system.

# SCHOOL COUNCIL ROLES AND ACTIVITIES

*Family engagement is a critical ingredient for children's school success "from cradle to career."*

Harvard Family Research Project and American National PTA<sup>2</sup>

The original purpose of school councils was to provide advice to principals and school boards, but survey results show that they now often take an active role in many other areas, including community building through social events, communicating with parents, and fundraising.

## WHAT IS THE CURRENT ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNCILS?

When asked what they see as their most important role, over 75% of school councils rank 'enhancing communication between the school and parents' either first or second. 'Supporting healthy school initiatives' and 'promoting school safety' were the most frequent choices after enhancing communication.

School councils' view of their role is in contrast with provincial regulations developed between 1995 and 2002. The regulations state "the purpose of the school council is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents."<sup>3</sup>

Councils' current belief that their most important roles are connected to communication, school health initiatives and school safety may more accurately reflect a 2010 perspective, and may be influenced by a number of factors, including a stronger desire for community-building, an increased knowledge about the importance of outreach to parents who may not be directly involved in the school, and a growing awareness of children's health issues and their impact on student success.

## MOST IMPORTANT—COMMUNICATION; MOST TIME— FUNDRAISING

Despite saying enhancing communication is councils' most important role, when asked how they spend most of their time, the majority of school councils report fundraising as their number one activity. Organizing school/community events comes second, and communication third. School improvement planning, working with principals on school

## WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...

Our mission as a school council has been and continues to be **COMMUNICATION** first and foremost, communication between administration and parents and parents and administration. Taking into account the variety of families and their circumstances, we strive to always find the most effective and user-friendly ways to be available to our parents and their concerns. We try to be inclusive and we encourage participation in any capacity in which a parent feels comfortable. We try to communicate any changes in policy and at the same time explain what it might mean, in layman's terms, to a parent and to their child.

*School Council Chair, Durham Catholic DSB*

For our Parent Council, community building is our focus.

*School Council Chair, Halton DSB*

Improving communication and increasing community participation continue to be our goals.

*School Council Chair, Peel DSB*

policy, and student achievement initiatives are substantially farther down the list of how councils spend their time.

Fundraising activities often require substantial planning and organization, so it is not surprising that a substantial amount of council time is dedicated to this work. However, comments from the surveys indicate that some school councils are developing policies to limit the amount of fundraising done. There is some anecdotal evidence that this is a growing trend across the province. Future survey results may confirm this shift in attitude.

## SCHOOL COUNCILS—THE HISTORY, THE POLICY AND THE CHANGING ROLE

School councils were established in Ontario in 1995, as a result of recommendations made by the Royal Commission on Learning in its report, *For the Love of Learning*.<sup>4</sup> Every school in the province is required to have a school council, with the majority

of members being parents. The overall purpose of school councils, as outlined in provincial policy, is to act in an advisory capacity to improve student achievement. School council policy requires principals to consult with school councils on certain issues and school councils may make recommendations to principals and school boards.

Many of the comments from the school council surveys indicate that councils continue to focus much of their time on increasing participation on the council, a goal that *may* be met with limited success. However, school councils can play a key role in parent inclusion<sup>5</sup>. They are uniquely situated not only to provide parents with information, but also to create opportunities for parents to have input on school activities and policy.

Improving student achievement through the active involvement of parents is identified in provincial policy as *the* key role of school councils. But research shows it is what parents do at home that has the greatest impact on student success. This being the case, it follows that school councils may be most effective if they focus on supporting the parental role at home, rather than focusing on getting more parents out to school council meetings. The survey results show this is a role that school councils are beginning to actively embrace.

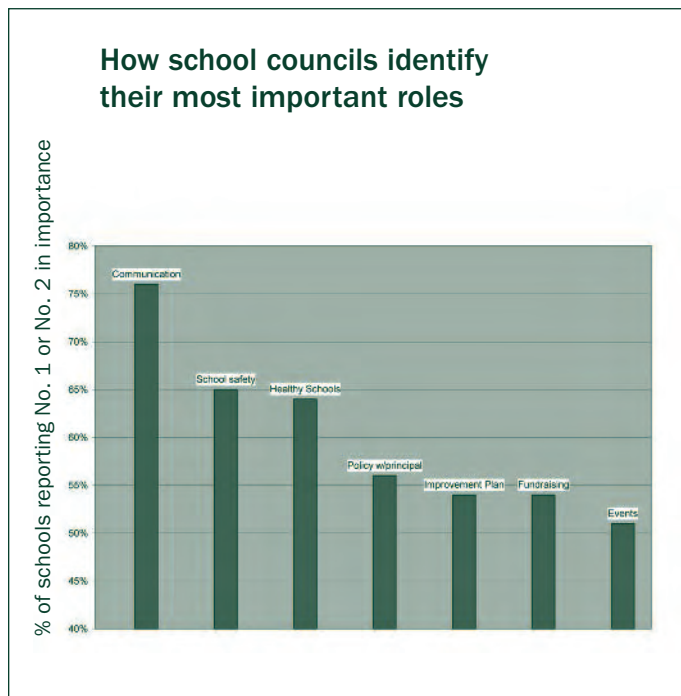
Regulation 612 directed school council participants to focus more on governance issues rather than fostering the types of parental involvement known to lead to improved student learning.

Through a focus on structural compliance and an implicit endorsement of one type of involvement (i.e., participating in decision making) over the other more effective forms of involvement, participants may have been led to believe that being part of a school council or attending school council meetings is the most desirable form of parental involvement.

There continue to be many school councils that believe that one of their main goals is to involve more parents in a school council or to seek attendance at a school council meeting as a goal in and of itself (Thurston, 2001).

Rather than understanding that there are only a small percentage of parents who wish to take part in this type of involvement, lower levels of participation on a school council is sometimes viewed as a sign of apathy by both parents and educators.

Gord Kerr  
[www.parentinvolvement.ca](http://www.parentinvolvement.ca)



# COMMUNICATION

School councils identify communication with parents as one of their most important roles. Councils in turn rely on principals, school boards, and the Ministry of Education to provide them with the information they need to do their work.

## HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCILS COMMUNICATE?

When asked about effective forms of communication with their parent community, 61% of councils identify newsletters, while, surprisingly, only 14% report using email, and 5% use websites. However, several respondents commented that they are beginning to use email and other technology for school council communication, a trend that will likely continue in the future. They also commented they would like more support to use technology for parent communication.

Communication, to be truly effective, has to be a two-way street. For the most part, school councils still rely on meetings as the most effective method to gather feedback from parents. Forty-eight per cent report meetings are their method of choice, while 37% report using surveys. A large number of school councils commented that, informal networking—chatting with parents in the schoolyard and at school events—is a very effective way of getting parent input.

## BETTER COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES = BETTER ENGAGEMENT

Research shows engaging parents has many benefits. It also shows that effective parent engagement is not easy and that great communication strategies are the key. School councils can build positive relationships with parents in the school community through outreach such as newsletters, fliers, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, family events, participation in neighborhood/community events, and by providing parents with information on ways to help their child at home. The key component of communication out to the school community is that it must be continuous and ongoing.<sup>6</sup> It is also vital that communication strategies target **all** parents, including those new to the education system or new to the country and those parents who may feel uncomfortable with their role in the world of “school.”

## WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...

**Our biggest challenge is touching base/communicating with all parents, and getting feedback. We do have a good-sized parent council however this year, and they have become more of the “network” we use to reach other parents—by word of mouth. They are also the standard base for feedback.**

*School Council, Halton DSB*

**With the internet now entrenched in our culture, interactive web sites should now be better utilized to not only disseminate important information but to also give parents a true voice. This opens the way for continually getting fresh, new ideas and more importantly it can also limit partisanship.**

*School Council Chair, Peel DSB*

**Getting parents involved has been a challenge. Having parents ask other parents to come to council meetings has been more successful than to simply send a notice home.**

*School Council Chair, Avon Maitland DSB*

**We struggle to really understand our very diverse community of parents/family and how to engage them in our school and our activities.**

*School Council Chair, Toronto DSB*

## GETTING UP TO DATE INFORMATION CONTINUES TO BE AN ISSUE FOR PARENTS

In 2005, the provincial government consulted with over 1,500 parents to find out what parents felt needed improving in Ontario’s education system. The most consistent complaint was about communication. Parents asked the province to develop more effective ways to communicate with parents. They wanted better two-way communication from the local to the provincial level, and they wanted more support for communication among parents at the local and regional levels.<sup>7</sup>

This year, 84% of councils report that their principals always or often notify them about education policy changes; 59% say they hear about changes from their school boards, and 34% report the Ministry of Education notifies them always or often. Over a quarter of respondents said they were never notified about education policy changes by the Ministry of Education.

Communication from the Ministry of Education may improve when all boards' Parent Involvement Committees (PICs) are fully functional, because one of the mandates of the PICs is to communicate information from the Ministry to school councils and parents.

### Who notifies school councils of education policy changes

|                              | Always | Often | Occasionally | Never |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Principal                    | 54%    | 30%   | 14%          | 3%    |
| School Board                 | 27%    | 32%   | 39%          | 11%   |
| Ministry of Education        | 14%    | 20%   | 39%          | 27%   |
| Parent Involvement Committee | 18%    | 25%   | 28%          | 30%   |

### GREAT COMMUNICATION PRACTICES FROM AROUND THE PROVINCE

Individual councils report a wide variety of effective communication techniques including:

- We use *Synervoice*, an automatic phone system to send out reminders before meetings
- Flyers sent with report cards guarantees they get to every parent.
- Surveys after meetings helps us adjust the way we do things.
- Promote the council face-to-face and everywhere!— at every school event, including concerts, parent-teacher interviews, curriculum night and kindergarten registration.
- Use local radio stations to make announcements.
- Interactive websites and social networking sites like Facebook
- Holding meetings in local mosques, churches or temples
- Our school emails each parent on Mondays with the events for the week.
- Communications are sent home one evening a week. Parents know to check school bags and they have to sign the communication sheet.
- We have parent reps on school council for each class in the school. Then it functions like a phone tree—the parent rep communicates directly with the class parents.
- In our newsletter we include a ballot. If it's filled out and returned to the school, the family is entered in a prize draw.
- On Curriculum Night, Parent Council holds a "Volunteer Fair". Parents see the displays of all the great things done in the previous year and learn about the roles in Parent Council, on committees and volunteer opportunities.

# BOARD LEVEL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Every school board in Ontario is required to have a Parent Involvement Committee (PIC).

IPICs came into being in 2005, as part of the province's new Parent Involvement Policy.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of these committees is to advise the school board on topics that matter to parents, plan and implement strategies to involve more parents at the regional level, act as a link between parents and the school board, and assess school boards' parent engagement strategies and practices.

Results from the survey show a need to build awareness at the school level about board Parent Involvement Committees and their work. The results also highlight the challenges PICs themselves have faced to work effectively without any formal guidelines.

## WHO IS ON THE PIC AND HOW DO THEY GET THERE?

While two-thirds of school councils report they are aware of their board's Parent Involvement Committee, 41% say they do *not* know how parents get to be on the PIC, 25 % report parents are elected to the PIC by other parents, 8 % report parents are appointed to the PIC by board staff, and 25% report parents are recruited through other channels. In some boards, each school has a representative on the PIC, while in others, representatives are assigned by regions or areas within the board. A number of councils commented that anyone who volunteers is welcome on the PIC.

School councils were also asked if they receive information from their PIC, and if there is a mechanism for giving input to the PIC.

- 52% report they get information from their PIC;
- 18% indicate they do not get information;
- 29% say they don't know if information comes from the PIC.
- 37% report their PIC has a mechanism for gathering parent input. Among the variety of methods:
  - parents can attend PIC meetings to give input,

or PIC representatives go to school council meetings to give info and get feedback

- parents email or phone the board, who will forward the information to the PIC
- parents provide input through their local school council chair or, in some boards, their principal
- some PICs hold regional meetings or use surveys
- board wide meetings with all school council chairs
- comments can be submitted to the school's regional school council rep who will relay them to the PIC member at the following regional school council meeting
- 56% say they do not know if there is a mechanism for giving input.

## PIC GUIDELINES

Policies and practices for PICs currently vary from board to board, but the province has recently released regulations that will create some consistency around the province. The regulations outline the purpose of PICs, which is to:

*“support, encourage and enhance parent engagement at the board level in order to improve student achievement and well-being...[by] providing information and advice on parent engagement to the board; communicating with and supporting school councils of schools of the board; and undertaking activities to help parents of pupils of the board support their children's learning at home and at school.”<sup>9</sup>*

The regulations also stipulate that:

- the majority of PIC members must be parents;
- only parents can be chairs or co-chairs;
- only parent members are entitled to vote;
- parent members may be employees of the board;

- the PIC may have up to three community member;
- the PIC will determine, in consultation with the school board director, how parent involvement funding from the province is to be spent (*Each school board currently receives \$5,000 plus 17¢ per student to support the PIC and parent engagement, as well as \$500 per school council, it is not clear whether the PICs will have control over the school council funding as well as the PIC/parent engagement funding. For large boards this funding can be more than \$300,000*); and
- the PIC will set by-laws governing things like the number of parents and community members on the PIC and the selection process.

#### **WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...**

**The Ministry implemented these engagement committees—but what is their mandate and direction? I'm involved in our PIC, and we are in limbo as to what exactly is expected of us and how to go about it.**

*School Council Chair, Toronto DSB*

**We are very active in the community, involving our other town schools and connected to Board via membership on Regional PIC.**

*School Council Chair, Niagara DSB*

**Our regional school council is made up of too many appointed people who do not have children in the system, and not enough parents who are elected by a good cross section of parents at large.**

*School Council Chair, board name withheld*

# FUNDRAISING

The vast majority of Ontario schools rely on extra funding to augment the support they receive from the province.

Ontario school boards report their schools raise over **half a billion dollars** in “school-generated funds,” a combination of fundraising, fees, corporate donations, and things like vending machines and cafeterias.<sup>10</sup>

Despite schools’ reliance on this extra funding, the province currently has no policy covering fees, fundraising or corporate involvement in schools.

## FUNDRAISING IS THE NUMBER ONE ACTIVITY FOR SCHOOL COUNCILS

The majority of school councils report fundraising as the activity on which they spend the most time. While parents continue to raise funds for traditional items, such as graduation ceremonies and student awards, over half of councils also report raising funds for basics such as computers, classroom supplies and text books, and 15% of schools report they raise money for renovations, additions or upgrades to their buildings. Other fundraising categories include:

- Field trips - 67% of schools
- Sports - 64% of schools
- Arts or music - 61% of schools
- Classroom supplies, textbooks or computers - 56% of schools
- Library books - 53% of schools
- Playground - 47% of schools
- Renovations, additions and/or upgrades to the school - 15% of schools

The amount that parents raise varies widely between schools, with some schools raising as much as \$200,000, and others not fundraising at all. Fundraising activities can be an effective method for engaging parents and school communities, but high levels of fundraising can lead to

inequities among schools. Wealthier neighbourhoods have the capacity to raise thousands of dollars to enrich their local school’s programs, while schools in lower-income areas have fewer parental resources to rely on.

We also asked school councils about who has the final authority over how the fundraised money is spent.

- 53% of schools report the authority was shared between school council, principal and others (including teachers)
- 13% report the principal had final authority
- 8% report the Home and School Association had final authority
- 63% report the school council or parent association has their own bank account.

## FUNDS RAISED AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL NOW TOTAL OVER \$500 MILLION

In their 2008/09 audited financial statements, school boards report their schools raised \$592 Million through a combination of fees, fundraising, vending machines, donations from businesses and other revenue sources. This represents a 4% increase in school-generated funds since 2005/06, when boards first started reporting on these extra funds.

In recent years many school boards have changed their policies to allow fundraising for capital projects and to allow for recognition of corporate and private donors with things like signage or naming rights. There is no consistency across the province in policies concerning corporate donations or large private donors.

## PROVINCIAL POLICY STILL NOT IN PLACE

In 2005, the Ministry of Education promised to develop a “fundraising policy [that] will guarantee school councils control over funds raised and limit fundraising by ensuring education essentials are provided by the system.” But in 2010, that fundraising policy is still at least 2 years away.

The Ministry is now consulting on guidelines for fees for secondary schools, and has committed that guidelines for fees will be in place for the 2011/2012 school year.

Consultations on provincial policy for fundraising and corporate partnerships will begin in 2011, and Ontario may have new fundraising policy by 2012/13.

### EQUITY CONCERNS

As school-generated funds become entrenched in school budgets, it will become more and more difficult for schools to go without this private funding. The increased reliance on fees and fundraising inevitably leads to a system of “have” and “have not” schools, as evidenced by the wide range in school fundraising totals—from \$0 to \$200,000. For some parents, the combination of fees and the pressure to participate in fundraising can be experienced as a form of exclusion or built-in inequity. People for Education is once again calling on the province to articulate a vision for education that outlines what things should be available to all students in every school, at no extra charge. Once the overall vision has been established, then it will be possible to identify the “extras” that might be funded by fees, fundraising and corporate partnerships.

### WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...

Our primary activity has been fundraising. While there has been some discussion about what we should be paying for and what the Ministry should pay for, generally, parents want to be involved and like being part of something that improves the school and increases opportunities for the students. Parents in our school participate in the fundraising initiatives as they are able to.

*School Council Chair, Avon-Maitland DSB*

Our school council has decided against fundraising in the past few years. Fundraising requires much time. We feel our time can be spent better with other activities, such as influencing policy changes, supporting school initiatives, and promoting community.

*School Council Chair, Superior-Greenstone DSB*

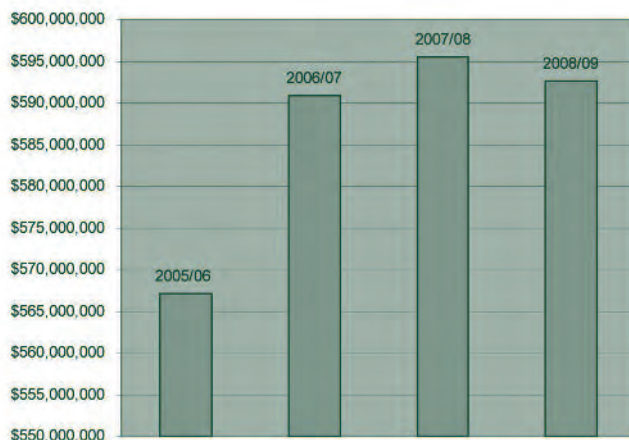
We hold an annual fun night fundraiser every May. It's always a success and our community gets involved and looks forward to it.

*School Council Chair, Trillium Lakelands DSB*

I think if school councils are to work then there has to be more assistance from the Boards so that the fundraising isn't the main priority. I know that being a part of the parent council is to benefit our students but we end up spending most of the time fundraising and sometimes the time is taken away from our own family time, which is limited to begin with.

*School Council Chair, Toronto Catholic DSB*

**Funds raised in Ontario Schools**



# FUNDING FOR SCHOOL COUNCILS

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education provides \$500 for every school council, and councils can also apply for up to \$1000 in funding for parent engagement initiatives through the Parents Reaching Out (PRO) grant program.<sup>11</sup>

School councils report using the \$500 in a variety of ways, often for multiple activities:

- 45% use it to enhance communication,
- 43% use it to support social activities, and
- 32% use it to provide parent workshops.
- Other reported uses for this funding include childcare, translation, and guest speakers.

Nearly 50% of school councils applied for PRO grants, and in 2009/10, over 1600 unique projects were funded by Parents Reaching Out grants.<sup>12</sup>

Although applying for grants such as these is a time consuming process, the high participation rate shows that school councils are responding in large numbers to these funding opportunities. For many parents, writing funding applications is most likely a new experience, but thousands are nevertheless learning how to do so, sometimes with support from their PIC or other regional parent associations.

## PRO GRANT IDEAS FROM AROUND THE PROVINCE

- “Take Your Parent to School” day activities
- Family literacy
- A school council website
- A resource library for parents
- A parent “lounge” in the school where parents can connect with each other
- Multicultural celebrations
- Family fitness events
- Math homework help kits for parents
- Welcome packages for kindergarten families
- Initiatives to connect with new parents and ease the transition between schools
- Speakers on a wide range of topics of interest to parents

# SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

***Stronger student achievement and learning are not the only potential benefits of stronger parent and community involvement. If parents and other community members understand more about the contributions schools make and the challenges they face, they may contribute public support and community resources to schools...Community building may also result from parent and community involvement.***

Carl Corter and Janette Pelletier, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education<sup>13</sup>

While one third of school councils report there is a child care in their school, very few report other community programs linked to their schools.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest in the potential of public schools as thriving community hubs housing a wide variety of community programs and supports for students and their families. An overview of research from organizations such as the Harvard Family Research Project<sup>14</sup> and the World Health Organization<sup>15</sup> shows that schools that are part of a network of integrated programs support healthy child development and increased student success.

Among the community/family programs schools report:

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Child care        | 33% |
| Parenting Centre  | 7%  |
| Adult Education   | 6%  |
| Health Clinic     | 3%  |
| Public Library    | 3%  |
| Employment Centre | 1%  |

While most schools do not report having integrated community programs, 72% do report their buildings are used for other purposes—everything from Girl Guides to ratepayers' meetings; 63% report there are fees for this community use.

In other provinces, governments fund a variety of forms of community schools. These schools provide a centre for a range of integrated programs including things like adult education, health clinics, social services and recreation.

- Quebec: *Community Learning Centres*—each participating school receives \$46,000 for a school community liaison.<sup>16</sup>
- Manitoba: *Community Schools Partnership Initiative*—funded through the Department of Education and Training, each qualifying school receives \$65,000 per year.<sup>17</sup>

## WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...

**Our School council welcomes parents but is unique in that many local social agencies are sitting members. It means that our school is very much community focused and supported.**

*School Council Chair, Toronto DSB*

**We are a small school with a very close knit community. Our school council is mostly about keeping parents informed about what is happening in the school and around in the community, to share ideas and best practices.**

*School Council Chair, Niagara Catholic DSB*

**We have a great deal of difficulty getting participants on the SCC. We need some new & creative ideas on how to motivate parents into participating.**

*School Council Chair, Bluewater DSB*

- British Columbia: *Neighbourhoods of Learning*—\$30 Million for nine model schools in six districts to include things such as early learning or child-care programs, space for non-profit organizations, health clinics, sports programs, family resource or seniors' centres, industry training, or branch libraries.<sup>18</sup>
- New Brunswick: *Community Schools Policy*—by 2012 nearly one quarter of the province's schools will be supported with approximately \$100,000 each in funding to support school/community partnerships.<sup>19</sup>

Ontario has recently introduced policy that may result in some schools housing *Child and Family Centres*, which could include everything from child care for the very young, to health clinics and recreation centres. There are no details yet as to how the centres will be structured or how they will be funded.

# WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT—A SCAN

*To be effective, parent and community involvement promotion through practice and policy needs to go beyond whether parents are involved; it needs to focus on how they are involved and what happens as a result.*<sup>20</sup> Carl Corter and Janette Pelletier, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

In Ontario, as in many other jurisdictions around the world, parent engagement in education has become an important focus over the past few years. There have been numerous academic studies examining parent involvement and its impact on children, schools, families and communities.

There is no uniform agreement on what counts as parent involvement (Flessa, 2008), and some researchers make a distinction between the terms *involvement* and *engagement*, but what is consistent in the available research is agreement that parental involvement/engagement does have an impact on student academic achievement, across culture, background and socio-economic status.

## BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

In studies that examined specific parent behaviours, it was found that having high expectations of children is the most significant contributor to their academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005). Parents reading with their children and talking with them about school were the next most important parental involvement activities. In fact, parents' involvement with their children at home has more of an impact on student achievement than in-school participation. Jeynes (2005) concludes that a general atmosphere of involvement may be most beneficial to children's success. What this means is that improving children's chances for success may be as simple as helping parents create an education-oriented atmosphere at home.

The research also shows that the school-based programs that are the most beneficial are the ones that include programming for parents *and* children, programs that target the home as well as the school, and programs that focus on involvement that is specifically linked to achievement (Pelletier & Corter, 2005). Programs work best when they respect the needs of families and address barriers to involvement such as childcare, transportation, and scheduling conflicts. For culturally diverse families, programs that recognize, respect, and address cultural and class differences are more effective, and invite more parental participation (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

key finding from the research is that parental involvement can transcend differences in socio-economic status, race, and other factors. This means that any group can experience the advantages of parent involvement (Jeynes, 2005), and that effective engagement has the capacity to reduce the achievement gap between marginalized students.

## BENEFITS FOR PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES

While the research demonstrates direct benefits for students when their parents are involved in their education, there are also side benefits for parents themselves—they learn more about public education, they feel a sense of belonging to a larger community (both within and beyond the school), they are engaged as citizens, and they develop more effective parenting skills. When parents can effectively engage with schools and advocate for their families, it helps set the stage for other types of community engagement as well (Colorado Department of Education, 2007). It can help build better relationships between parents and teachers and lead to higher satisfaction with the school for all. The benefits to parents can, in turn, reinforce the benefits back to children (Pelletier & Corter, 2004).

## WHAT IS NEEDED?

The research shows the benefits of engaging parents in their children's education. It also shows it is not easy. However, there are some activities that can facilitate parent involvement. Effective engagement is more likely in schools that are welcoming places with respectful and trusting relationships between staff, families and communities. **Communication is the key to effective family and community connections.** Schools can build positive relationships through outreach efforts such as newsletters, fliers, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, family events, participation in neighborhood/community events, and by providing parents with information on ways to help their child at home. The key component of the communication, however, is that it must be continuous and ongoing (Henderson & Mapp, 2002: 46).

Schools need to make a conscious effort to actively invite and welcome parent involvement. And they need to develop programs that encourage, support and enhance parents' involvement in their children's schooling (Henderson & Mapp, 2002: 45). Schools need to build a foundation of trust and respect, connect parent engagement strategies to learning objectives, and reach out to parents beyond the school (Redding, Langdon, Meyer, & Sheley, 2004).

Leadership is an essential factor in fostering this environment, as is training in teachers' colleges, professional development courses, and educational administration training programs.

#### **WHAT SCHOOLS TOLD US...**

I have been a member of our school council for 3 years, this year as Chairperson. I've made many friends and look forward to every meeting. I feel a part of not only my grandson's education, but the growth and development of every child, and that is a very rewarding experience. *Secondary School Council Chair, Northeastern Catholic DSB*

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# NOTES





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