

BEYOND FUNDRAISING

THE 2011 REPORT ON ONTARIO'S SCHOOL COUNCILS

People for Education

The 2011 Report on Ontario's School Councils



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DOCUMENT CITATION

This report should be cited in the following manner:

“The School Council Report 2011.” People for Education

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People for Education is an independent organization working to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
School Council Roles & Activities	2
Communication	4
Board-Level Parent Involvement	6
Fundraising	8
Funding for School Councils	9
Parent Involvement at Home & School	10
Council to Council: Bright Ideas from Across Ontario	12
Feedback About the School Council Survey	13
Recommendations	14
Endnotes	15

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all of the school councils who took the time to complete the survey and share your stories. Your participation has helped to increase our understanding of school councils and the role they play in supporting their school communities.

In particular, we thank the following people who supported this project:

Tracy Bachellier, Stratford

Marion Battersby, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Anelia Coppes, Parry Sound

Shari Kosowan, Pembroke

Lisa Koster, Burlington

Joanne MacEwan, Ottawa

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People for Education is supported by thousands of individual donors, and by the work and dedication of hundreds of volunteers. We also receive financial support from the Atkinson Foundation, the Canadian Auto Workers, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario, the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, the Ministry of Education, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the RBC Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of the relationship that is developed between the school administrator, teaching staff and school council directly affects the atmosphere within the school. A mutual respect for one another and the ability to view this group as a team, working toward giving our children the best possible education, makes being involved on the council a positive experience.

School council, Simcoe County DSB

For the past fourteen years, People for Education has been conducting surveys of Ontario schools to gather information about the staff, services and programs available. Two years ago, we introduced 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, and school council funding and fundraising. The information gathered from this survey provides a better understanding of school councils and the work they do to support their school communities.

We send surveys to every school council in the province. This year, over 729 councils from 68 of the province's 72 school boards completed the survey. Survey participation reflects the regional distribution of schools across the province¹ and approximates the proportional split between elementary schools (78%) and secondary schools (22%).

Once again this year, our survey results show that school councils across the province are working tirelessly to support their local schools and communities. School council members demonstrate a steadfast commitment to public education and a willingness to support their local schools for the benefit not only of their own children, but also for the whole school community. They contribute countless hours of their time and are justifiably proud of the work they do.

But our survey results also capture some of the challenges school councils struggle with. The most frequently raised concerns include how to get more parents involved in the school council, how to balance the time spent between fundraising and other council activities and how to ensure effective communication between the education system (at both the school and board levels) and the broader parent community.

Here are the key findings from this year's survey:

- Enhancing communication is named as the most important role for the majority of councils, but fundraising is the activity on which they spend the most time.
- School councils are more aware of the work of their provincially mandated board-level Parent Involvement Committees (PICs) this year, and 71% report getting information from their PIC, up from 52% last year.
- 62% of councils report using email to communicate with parents, but only 5% report that all families in the school are on the email list.
- 92% of school councils ask parents for input or feedback. Councils report they most frequently ask for feedback about fundraising.
- Councils report that an average of 11 parents attend each school council meeting.

SCHOOL COUNCIL ROLES & ACTIVITIES

We have decided that a more informal approach to our school council is what works best for the school community we are involved with. We have a very dedicated council, though we are small in number. We have excellent staff representatives and an extremely supportive principal. We take pride in our school and strive, as a council, to make a welcoming, warm environment to encourage all parents to become involved on whatever level works for the individual. We have many dedicated parent volunteers who are not on our council, but who have become involved because of the approach taken by the principal, staff and council at our school. Our goal is to make all parents feel comfortable and welcome within the school community and to continue to increase their involvement.

School council, Algoma DSB

School councils say communicating with parents is their most important role.

Every school in Ontario is required to have a school council, with the majority of members being parents. According to provincial school council regulations, “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.”²

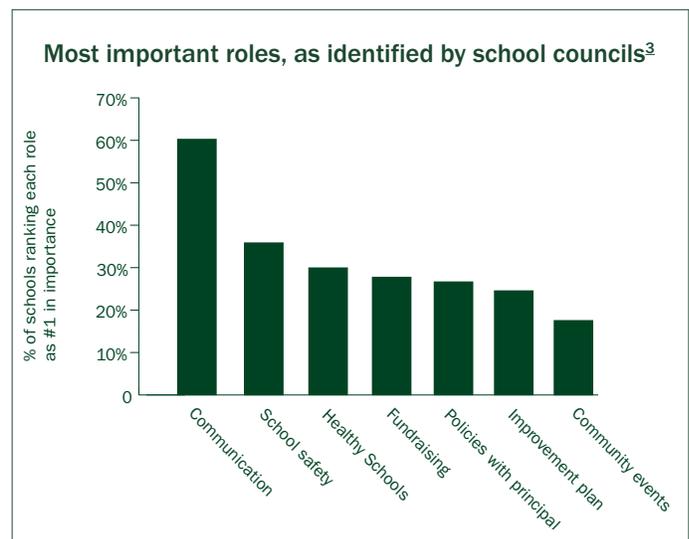
While the stated purpose of school councils is to provide advice to principals and school boards, our survey results show that many school councils now recognize the importance of other forms of parent involvement. By focusing more on communicating with parents at home and community-building through social events, school councils appear to be carving out a different role for themselves than was originally intended.

COMMUNICATION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ROLE, BUT FUNDRAISING TAKES THE MOST TIME

When asked about their most important role, 71% of school councils chose “enhancing communication between the school and parents.”

“Promoting school safety” and “supporting healthy school initiatives” were the next most frequently chosen roles.

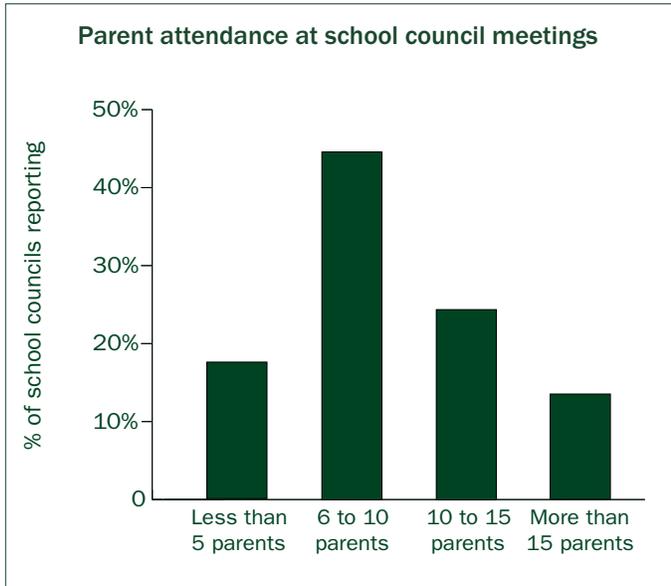
But there is a disconnect between what school councils identify as their most important roles and what they actually spend the most time on. While the majority of councils say that communicating with parents is their most important role, 43% of respondents indicate that fundraising takes up the most time. Fundraising activities often require substantial planning and organization, so it is not surprising that a lot of council time is dedicated to this work.



On the other hand, several school councils say that they do not fundraise at all or have separate groups or committees that do school fundraising.

TOO MUCH FOCUS ON INCREASING SCHOOL COUNCIL PARTICIPATION?

School councils continue to spend a great deal of their time trying to increase participation on the council, a goal that may be met with limited success. This year, we asked how many parents attend school council meetings. While the responses range from zero to 60, the average number of attendees is 11. Councils hold an average of eight meetings per year, but the results indicate that schools with more school council meetings per year tend to have slightly higher attendance at meetings.



WHAT SCHOOL COUNCILS TOLD US . . .

We are fortunate to have a very strong council with parents who care about our school and community. The main reason why we are very successful is due to our very strong leadership.... We meet on a regular basis and try to solve any situations before they become a problem. We are a very small school with a very diverse population; we are a family who works together through our community, church, school, parents and students.

School council, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

We are challenged by the fact that many of our parents, in fact, I believe a majority, do not speak English. The council itself is small and slowed by translation. Nevertheless, it is very functional, and we are working hard at getting more parents to attend. Our school activities are very well attended, and in that sense, parents are very involved.

School council, Toronto DSB

We are a very small school council. We are good at organizing events that many parents attend, but we don't seem to be able to attract more parents to be part of school council. I'm not sure if this matters because we are meeting our goal of helping parents to become more engaged with the school—even if they aren't sitting on council.

School council, Rainbow DSB

I simply want to say that rural schools face a huge issue in getting parents involved because our populations are declining. Meanwhile, our programmes are being cancelled due to lack of staffing, and we as a council are powerless to prevent it.

School council, Avon Maitland DSB

I have been on the Parent Advisory Committee for three years and find it most beneficial to see what is happening in the school... it is a positive way for parents to communicate with the principal and staff members.... One of the main reasons I decided to be part of the council is that there are no fundraising expectations, which allows us to focus on the students and the events within the school during our time together.

School council, Lambton Kent DSB

COMMUNICATION

It was interesting to read your annual report and hear how much time many school councils spend on fundraising. For us, this has not been a major role at all. I believe at the high school level... much of our role pertains to communication: promoting/encouraging parental engagement, determining the best methods to communicate with parents and figuring out how to foster not only discussion of information, but also receive communication from them—it's ideally a two-way process. We see this communication role in general as our overarching concern.

School council, Waterloo Region DSB

When school councils use technology to communicate, more parents become involved.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRENGTHENS PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Effective communication can have a positive impact on parent involvement and helps parents be better equipped to support their children's learning.⁴ School councils can build positive relationships with parents through newsletters, emails, phone calls, community events and even chats in the schoolyard. But to be effective, communication must be continuous and ongoing.⁵

It is also important that communication strategies target all parents, including those new to the education system or to the country, and those parents who may feel uncomfortable with their role in the world of "school."⁶ School councils may need to use several different methods of communication to ensure that the information is reaching everyone.

HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCILS COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS?

We asked school councils which communication tools they use to engage with parents. This year,

- 92% of school councils report using a school newsletter.
- 44% of school councils report using a school council website.
- 62% of school councils report using email.

Many school councils use a combination of communication tools:

- 40% use both a newsletter and a website.
- 31% use both email and a website.
- 28% use a combination of websites, email and newsletters.

ONLINE COMMUNICATION WORKS

School councils are increasingly turning to electronic communication as an effective and efficient way to communicate with parents. Analysis of the survey results indicates that the use of technology has a positive impact:

- More parents attend school council meetings.⁷
- School councils with websites are more likely to communicate with parents by email.⁸
- Using technology increases the likelihood that councils will seek input from parents.⁹

School councils are leading the way on electronic communication. In fact, a far greater percentage of school councils are using electronic communication than are classroom teachers. According to this year's EQAO results, 64% of grade 3 teachers and 53% of grade 6 teachers "never" use electronic tools (email, blogs, websites) to communicate with parents.¹⁰

However, councils are still facing challenges as they try to get all school families onto their email contact list. Among the councils using email as a communication method, only 5% have all families on their list, while 38% report having "most" families and 57% report only having "some" families on the list.

Internet use is widespread and growing rapidly among Canadians, and this year's survey results show that it is an effective way to communicate with families. But it is important to remember that not all families have access to the internet. According to Statistics Canada, only 56% of families with incomes under \$30,000 per year use the internet.¹¹ Thus it is important that schools use a wide range of tools to communicate with parents.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Communication is a two-way street, and getting feedback from the school community is just as important as providing them with information.

This year, we asked school councils if they ask parents for feedback, and if so, what they are most likely to ask for feedback about. 92% of the survey participants said that they seek parent input on school-related matters. While their responses ranged from “Everything and anything” to “no one gives feedback,” school councils were most likely to ask parents about fundraising (33%), school/board/Ministry policies and issues (13%) and school events and programs (12%).

HOW PARENTS FIND OUT ABOUT POLICY CHANGES

Principals are required to consult with school councils on certain issues, and school councils can make recommendations to principals and school boards. But parents should hear about changes to education policies from many sources.

This year, school councils report they hear about policy changes “always” or “often” from principals (86%), their school board (58%), their Parent Involvement Committee (39%) and the Ministry of Education (31%). These numbers have only changed slightly since last year.

Who notifies school councils about education policy changes?

	Always	Often	Occasionally	Never
Principal	56%	30%	12%	2%
School board	26%	32%	31%	10%
Parent Involvement Committee	16%	23%	26%	34%
Ministry of Education	11%	20%	38%	31%

WHAT SCHOOL COUNCILS TOLD US . . .

Nous avons trouvé très difficile les règles du conseil scolaire qui rend la communication directe entre le conseil d'école et les parents presque impossible. Bien que nous commençons à voir plus d'ouverture à ce sujet, il y a encore des problèmes.

School council, CSD du Centre Sud-Ouest

Just because it is a high school doesn't mean parents shouldn't be involved in their children's education. We can't fix it if we don't know it's broken... communication is key!

School council, DSB Ontario North East

We ask parents for input on what type of programs/events that they would like to see presented that would assist them with helping their children reach their full potential. We also ask for input on such issues as school safety, healthy schools and communication.

School council, Near North DSB

[Nous demandons] ceux qu'ils aimeraient améliorer dans l'école et la façon dont ils peuvent contribuer aux changements demandés.

School council, CSDC Centre-Sud

BOARD-LEVEL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Our school council was strengthened this year by the Thames Valley PIC gathering in October in London. There were many opportunities to interact with other schools and school councils, as well as breakout workshops. This helped give our school council direction as well as a sense of belonging to a larger community.

School council, Thames Valley DSB

This year, the percentage of school councils reporting they get information from their school board Parent Involvement Committees (PICs) has increased by more than one-third.

PICs came into being as part of the province's *Parent Involvement Policy* in 2005. All boards were required to have a PIC set up by January of 2011. Regulation 612, the regulation governing school councils, has been amended to include Parent Involvement Committees and provides an outline of their composition, mandate and roles.¹²

Parent Involvement Committees have three key roles:

- to provide information and advice to the school board on parent engagement and communicating with parents
- to develop strategies and initiatives the board can use to engage more parents in supporting their children's education, both at home and at the school
- to share information with and support the work of school councils¹³

AWARENESS OF PICs IS GROWING

Last year's survey results showed a need to build awareness at the school level about Parent Involvement Committees and their work. This year, there has been a substantial increase in school councils' awareness of PICs:

- 79% of survey respondents report that they are aware of the PIC, up from 67% last year.
- 71% report getting information from their PIC, up from 52% last year.
- 52% report a mechanism for giving input to the PIC, up from 37% last year.
- 39% do not know if there is a mechanism for giving input to the PIC, compared to 56% last year.

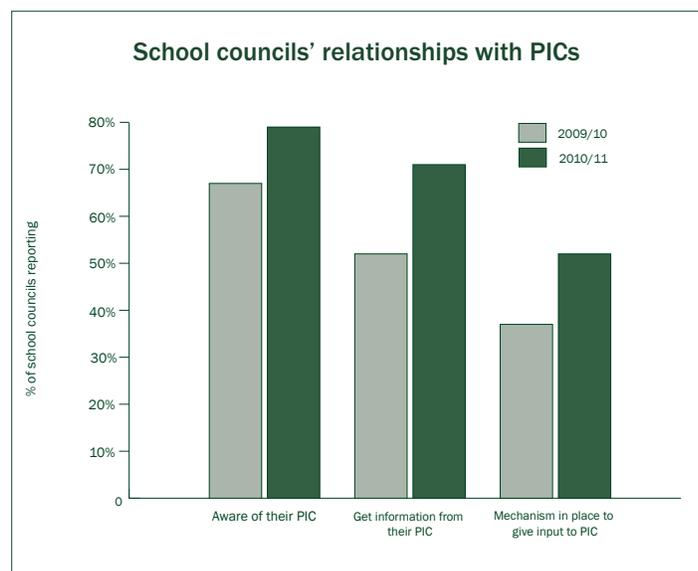
HOW ARE PARENTS CHOSEN FOR PICs?

We asked school councils how parents get to be on their board's PIC. This year, 30% of respondents report that they do not know how parents get on their board's PIC, which is an improvement from last year, when 41% reported that they did not know.

Of those that did know,

- 18% said that parent members are elected by parents.
- 8% said that parents are selected by board staff or the director.
- 20% said other processes are used.

Among the councils that say another method is used, the majority indicate that anyone who volunteers becomes a member. The next most frequently cited method is that each school council chooses a representative for the committee.



LISTENING TO PARENTS—HOW PICs GET FEEDBACK

Councils were also asked if there is a mechanism for giving input to the PIC. Just over half of the respondents (52%) say that there is a process for providing input, while 39% say that they don't know if there is a mechanism and 9% say their PIC had no defined method for providing input or feedback.

School councils report their PICs use the following input/feedback methods:

- through the school council chair or PIC representative
- email or interactive websites
- meetings and conferences
- surveys
- through a regional group or school council network

MINISTRY SUPPORT FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT COMMITTEES

The increased awareness of PICs among school council members may be an indication that these committees are becoming more established, have a better understanding of their role and are better able to connect with their communities. The changes may also be a result of Ministry initiatives to support the establishment of PICs in every school board in Ontario. The formal recognition of Parent Involvement Committees in the regulations¹⁴ and a draft handbook¹⁵ to guide their work may have helped these committees to get established and do their work more effectively.

WHAT SCHOOL COUNCILS TOLD US . . .

Our trustee has tried to facilitate better communication from the PIC and she has been reprimanded for her efforts. Meanwhile, there has been no contact or communication from this group, even to notify us of who the representative is.

School council, board name withheld

I only found out about the PIC because I'm the School Council Chair. I was asked to attend the meetings because of this role. However, I have found them to be a waste of time and have stopped going to them. Getting the minutes is quite sufficient.

School council, board name withheld

There is a strong attempt to select parent reps [for our PIC] based on having equitable representation from all geographic clusters, both elementary and secondary. The school website is used to advertise that the PIC is seeking parent reps.

School council, Hamilton-Wentworth DSB

I recently joined the PIC so I can speak for my specific school and potentially the family of associated schools. There is no clear mechanism yet for the broad parent population to give input or to access the PIC.

School council, board name withheld

FUNDRAISING

Our school council focuses on school spirit; our fundraising initiatives are targeted on infusing pride and fun and creating a collaborative environment for students, teachers, staff and parents.

School council, Toronto DSB

The vast majority of Ontario schools rely on extra funding to augment the support they receive from the province. Our annual *Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011* found that schools are raising over half a billion dollars in “school-generated funds,” which includes fundraising, fees, corporate donations, vending machines and cafeterias and money raised for charities.¹⁶

WHETHER IT'S PLANNING OR PAYING, PARENTS TAKE THE LEAD

When it comes to fundraising, parents play a key role. Fundraising activities are usually organized by parents, and most of the funds raised come out of the pockets of parents and family members. When asked what takes up most of their time, school councils cited fundraising more than any other activity, with 43% of school councils saying that it consumes most of their time. Councils are also most likely to consult with parents about this topic. Many secondary school councils commented that their students take the lead in fundraising activities, but fundraising continues to be an issue of concern for school councils across the province.

WHAT DOES ALL THAT FUNDRAISING PAY FOR?

While parents continue to raise funds for traditional items, such as graduation ceremonies and student trips and activities, school councils also report raising funds for basics, such as computers, classroom supplies and text books, and building upgrades.

NEW FUNDRAISING POLICY—HELP OR HINDRANCE?

Fundraising activities can be an effective method for engaging parents and school communities, but high levels of fundraising can lead to inequities among schools.

The Ministry of Education is currently conducting consultations on new draft guidelines for fundraising.¹⁷ In addition to allowing fundraising already done in most schools, the new guidelines propose to allow fundraising for such core costs as upgrades to school facilities (e.g.

retrofitting auditoriums), sports facilities (e.g. running tracks) and technological investments (e.g. computer labs). If these guidelines come into effect, schools with a greater capacity to fundraise may have better science labs and auditoriums, and increased access to 21st century technological advancements.

Public consultations on the new fundraising policy will be completed in November 2011, and the new guidelines will come into effect in September 2012.

Next year's survey will include questions about the impact of the new fundraising guidelines on existing school and board policies, and will begin to track the number of school councils who choose not to engage in fundraising activities.

WHAT SCHOOL COUNCILS TOLD US . . .

If we were to get feedback, I am sure it would be regarding fundraising. Too much time is devoted to this.

School council, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

We are trying to make our council less about fundraising and more about learning what is happening at the school. We now have sub-committees for fundraising, and council meetings are only used for updates on fundraising initiatives, rather than the planning of them.

School council, Toronto DSB

We have made a conscious decision not to spend our time fundraising as we feel that this is not the role of school council. We also have mostly lower-income families in our school, so we do not feel it is ethical (or practical) to fundraise from them. However, this means that the school (staff really) does a bunch of fundraising within the school. I guess it is really difficult to run a school without that extra cash.

School council, Rainbow DSB

FUNDING FOR SCHOOL COUNCILS

Parent engagement is a major goal this year. We received a PRO Grant and are working on a plan and event to better engage parents.

School council, York Region DSB

This year, 53% of school councils report that they applied for a Parents Reaching Out (PRO) Grant to support parent engagement activities.

\$500 ANNUAL FUNDING FOR SCHOOL COUNCIL WORK

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education provides school boards with \$500 for every school council to support the council's work. We asked school councils to report how they use this funding from the Ministry. The most frequently cited use was for social events and parent engagement activities. Interestingly, the second most frequently mentioned use of this funding was for the benefit of students, including things such as scholarships, SMART boards, books and equipment.

How school councils spend their \$500 Ministry funding

Family and social events, parent engagement activities	31%
Students (grad, scholarships, SMART boards, books, etc.)	15%
Parent education (workshops, speakers, resources)	13%
Communication (website, Synervoice, newsletters, etc.)	12%
Welcome events/info	10%
Administration (insurance, police checks, child care, etc.)	9%
Don't know/undecided	8%
Unaware of money	4%
Volunteer appreciation events/gifts	2%
Other (parent survey, schoolyard, busing)	1%
School promotion (brochures, banners)	1%
Translation	1%

PARENTS REACHING OUT GRANTS

Councils can apply for up to \$1,000 in funding for parent engagement initiatives through the Parents Reaching Out Grants.¹⁸ This year, 53% of responding school councils applied for a PRO Grant, virtually the same as last year. Since 2006, when these grants were introduced, the Ministry has funded more than 7,000 school council initiatives.

The high participation rate in applying for these grants shows that school councils want to engage more parents and are excited about the possibilities that these grants provide. However, there continue to be a few glitches in the application process: Discussions in our online community raised concerns about last minute changes to the application deadline.¹⁹ This year, a number of council members expressed the view that there was insufficient lead time for many councils to be able to meet, discuss the application and prepare it for submission.

School councils sought funding for everything from the development of a school council website, to a resource library for parents, to a volunteer room where parents can connect with each other and support the school. By far, the most commonly reported ideas were for events and programs that help parents engage in their children's education. School councils planned "Take Your Parent to School" day activities, family literacy nights, multicultural celebrations, family fitness events, math homework help information for parents and welcome packages for new families. This diversity of ideas to increase parent engagement shows that school councils are working hard to develop programs and resources that meet the unique needs of their individual communities.

WHAT SCHOOL COUNCILS TOLD US . . .

Too much red tape and paperwork to apply [for a PRO Grant].

School council, Near North DSB

We received a [PRO] Grant to have a parent resource centre; however, there is no room in this small school and therefore, the centre is tucked away in the office and very rarely, if at all, do the books [in the centre] get read or even looked at.

School council, Dufferin-Peel CDSB

PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT HOME & SCHOOL

Chatting with kids about school or even asking questions about a TV show—helping to connect something kids learned in school to a real world experience does more for students’ chances for success than “drill and skill” homework sessions, endless nagging or racing off to a school meeting.

People for Education, Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school

In August 2011, People for Education released a report, *Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school*, which reviewed thirty years of research from Canada, the United States and England. The evidence is unequivocal: Parents make a difference. And the way they contribute most to their children’s education is through their involvement at home.

Researchers divide parent involvement into two basic categories:

- home-based activities and attitudes, such as having high expectations, talking together about school, building work habits and a positive approach to learning, and reading together
- school-based activities, such as communicating with teachers, attending meetings about your child, volunteering in the classroom, and working on the school council

The research shows that home-based activities and attitudes are more closely linked to students’ academic achievement than school-based activities. Researchers have also found that it is the *kind* of home-based activities that matters most.

But many Ontario students report that their parents aren’t doing the things that really make a difference.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES THAT WORK

There are four things parents can do that experts agree improve students’ chances for success:

1. **Having high expectations.** High parental expectations have the greatest impact on student achievement.²⁰ When parents consistently express belief in their children’s potential and tell their kids that they expect them to succeed academically, students do better.

2. **Talking about school.** A major study of 25,000 U.S. school children showed “home discussion”—parents talking with children about school activities and programs—had a greater impact on academic achievement than monitoring homework, having a parent at home after school, or the time students are allowed to watch TV or go out during the week.²¹

3. **Shaping attitudes and work habits.** As children grow older, many of the factors that directly affect achievement, such as how children prepare for a test and whether or how they answer a particular question, are out of parents’ control. Parents’ most critical influence on school success is in how they shape children’s attitudes, sense of personal competence and work habits, including persistence, seeking help and planning. Rather than trying to directly “teach” their children, parents should focus on helping them handle distractions and crises of confidence, praise them for effort and persistence and demonstrate a positive attitude about school as a whole.

4. **Reading together.** Reading is one of the foundations of all education, and parents can make a major difference by reading and talking about books and stories with their children. Reading with and to children—in any language—is the best way to turn kids on to reading.

This doesn’t mean that parents should be trying to teach their children to read. When it comes to literacy, parents’ most important role is building the comprehension and oral language skills that come through reading with their children and conversations about what they’ve read.

THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT RESEARCHERS KNOW AND WHAT PARENTS AND SCHOOLS DO

A 2009/10 survey by the province’s Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) of all grade 3 and 6 students shows that many parents don’t talk to their kids about school or read with them regularly, and many schools struggle to reach parents.²²

Talking about school

- Less than half of students in grade 3 (46%) report they talk to a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day” about their school activities.
- In grade 6, only 38% of students say they talk about school activities with their parent or guardian “every day or almost every day.”

Reading together

- Only 21% of children in grade 3 report that they read together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day.”
- 55% of grade 3 students report either that they never read with a parent or guardian, or that they do so only once or twice a month.

EQAO also surveyed all principals and teachers in grades 3 and 6.²³ Principals’ and teachers’ responses confirm that communication with parents is an ongoing concern:

- 86% of principals say they keep all parents informed about school activities, but only 32% say they feel successful at helping all parents understand student learning goals and outcomes.
- 60% of grade 3 teachers and only 38% of grade 6 teachers say they regularly (once a month or more) share information with parents about what they can do at home to support their children’s learning.

BUILDING STRONG HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

The good news is that a school’s overall approach to communicating, collaborating and building relationships with parents can make a difference in students’ academic achievement. It is this overall approach, rather than particular school *programs*,²⁴ that makes the biggest difference.

Some things that create effective working relationships with parents, which lead to a positive impact on student success, include:

- **Fostering collaborative relationships and trust.**

Collaborative relationships with teachers and others at the school are linked to improved attendance, better student engagement and more positive relationships.²⁵ Schools should take the lead in ensuring that collaborative relationships are effectively established and relevant for *all* parents.

- **Inviting participation.**

Parents need to be invited to participate in their children’s education—both in general and specific ways. A general invitation comes by creating an inviting school climate and through teachers’ welcoming, supportive attitude. Specific invitations include communications from teachers suggesting parents get involved in particular activities with their children. Invitations from teachers are particularly important for parents who are less confident in their abilities to help their children in the school system, and for parents who may not realize they have a role to play in their older children’s education.

- **Engaging in two-way communication.**

When schools communicate directly and seek information from parents about what they want and need for their child’s success, school-family connections are strengthened. Schools need to look at a variety of ways of communicating with and hearing from parents.²⁶ Regular email updates or a blog may work well for some parents, while phone calls or face-to-face contact may be a better way to reach others.

The full version of the report, which was produced with support from the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, is available on our website at www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/People-for-Education-Doing-What-Matters-Most-how-parents-can-help-their-children-succeed-at-school-2011.pdf.

COUNCIL TO COUNCIL: BRIGHT IDEAS FROM ACROSS ONTARIO

Our school council has more than doubled in size in two years. We run an ad on the local radio station and have put up bulletin board reminders... I think it's helping!

School council, Trillium Lakelands DSB

One of the greatest things about school council members across the province is their enthusiasm for sharing ideas, tools and resources with other school councils. They are continually seeking new ways to improve their work and are more than willing to share their own experience and expertise to support other councils. This collaborative approach is reflected in the many tips that survey respondents provided.

Here are some bright ideas from school councils...

RECRUIT FAMILIES STARTING IN KINDERGARTEN

“Recruit at the JK and SK entry points for elementary school councils. Those parents are often the most keen and have an interest to stay with council longer as their children grow up in the school. This will add more new faces and a greater pool of candidates to encourage joining council executive. Food works best for us to reach our multicultural families. Festival of Lights, International Bread Fair and our Fall Harvest Table all permit families to contribute something to life at our school. Create a council wiki—it’s a great way to virtually store all your files and pass on knowledge to new members. Have a succession plan; your members will not be there forever.”

School council, Ottawa-Carleton DSB

COULD PICs COME TO SCHOOL COUNCIL MEETINGS?

“It would be better if PIC comes to school council meetings to explain their activities and establish a relationship with the parents.”

School council, Toronto DSB

UNDERSTAND BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

“We encourage allowing full participation from parents—we feel that holding elections or mandating campaigning or having to provide biographies in order to fill school council positions discourages some people from pursuing leadership opportunities.”

School council, Toronto DSB

SURVEY PARENTS TO BUILD PARTICIPATION

“Last year, we sent out a survey to find out why we were not getting parents to the council meetings. It became a tool for success. We had six parents last year and this year we had 24 at the first meeting. It was a great way to receive feedback and show parents the type of group we are.”

School council, Waterloo Region DSB

“A parent survey provides valuable information. We found out that there seem to be a lot of parents who are willing to volunteer but do not know how.”

School council, Toronto CDSB

“We do a survey every year to determine the climate, our role representing parents and current needs in the school community.”

School council, Durham CDSB

SET SHARED GOALS WITH PRINCIPAL

“In order to have an effective council, there needs to be an open relationship between the principal and the council. Parents need to know that their input is valued and important to the success of the school. Setting realistic, achievable goals at the beginning of the year will help keep meetings focused and give the council a feeling of accomplishment at the end of the year.”

School council, Near North CDSB

CONSTANT REMINDERS: COUNCIL WANTS TO HEAR FROM PARENTS

“On any email we send out, we tell parents that we would love to hear from them.”

School council, Toronto CDSB

FEEDBACK ABOUT THIS YEAR'S SURVEY

The survey opened my mind to things I should be doing. Thank you!

School council, Toronto DSB

Thank you for taking the time to compile all the information that is received from these surveys and for all the hard work you do advocating on behalf of parents for students. I know that data is used to help the Ministry see the inconsistencies and how the scale is out of balance. Parents play a vital role in education, and it is great to see that the Ministry is taking this role seriously. This is something that will have to be constantly reinforced in many boards though as the parents' role is undervalued continuously. More in-servicing on PICs and councils needs to be done for administrators and senior admin.

School council, Sudbury CDSB

In their surveys, school councils told us they appreciate our report, but they want to know more about certain topics.

Here are some of their suggestions...

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PRINCIPALS, STAFF AND SCHOOL COUNCILS

- the principal-school council relationship and the kinds of support that principals offer school councils
- the accountability of principals to school councils
- inviting school council members to staff meetings
- the teacher-school council relationship
- the school's provision of parents' email addresses to the school council

SCHOOL COUNCIL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

- agenda setting
- having a school council executive
- the creation and review of school council by-laws
- succession plans for the Chair and other positions
- building a larger, stronger council
- the ratio of students at the school to parents on the school council
- the gender ratio on the school council
- school council sub-committees for things like fundraising, communication, etc.
- voting rights of elected and attending members

- policy development and planning at the school board or Ministry level
- sending a representative to regional parent groups, PIC, or any school board committees
- setting annual goals
- greatest successes and challenges

BOARD SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL COUNCILS

- school council orientation/forums/training
- trustee visits to school council meetings
- school council communication with the trustee
- input from school councils on school board policies under review

PARENT ENGAGEMENT

- reaching out to different language groups
- most successful events/ideas for engaging parents

FUNDRAISING

- choosing not to fundraise
- most effective fundraising events/ideas
- equity issues in fundraising

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. COMMUNICATION

School councils are taking the lead on using electronic communication as an effective tool to reach parents. These means of communication offer the potential to bridge some of the gaps between home and school.

People for Education recommends that

- schools' administration actively seek parents' permission to have their names included on school council email lists upon registration and at the beginning of each school year.
- school councils use a variety of means of communication, including print, poster and face-to-face outreach, because a singular focus on electronic communication can exclude some of the parents who already have the least access to learning resources.

2. ROLES AND ACTIVITIES OF SCHOOL COUNCILS

School councils can play a key role in supporting the development of education policy and school practices that reflect the important role parents can play in their children's success.

People for Education recommends that

- the province update the regulations governing school councils so that the regulations acknowledge, authorize and support the roles that school councils have identified as their most important—communication and parent engagement activities.
- school councils share information about effective parent involvement, particularly the critical role for home-based parent involvement with parents in their school communities.
- school councils support outreach to their school communities to ensure that all parents receive support and resources they need to be active and welcomed participants in the school community.
- the province ensure that provincial initiatives intended to support school councils' outreach—such as the Parents Reaching Out Grants—be structured with clearly publicized timelines to take into account the fact that some school councils don't meet regularly.

3. FUNDRAISING

An increased reliance on fundraising to support school programs and activities can lead to an increased gap between “have” and “have not” schools.

People for Education recommends that

- the province ensure that every student in Ontario has access to a broadly based education that includes adequate learning materials in all subjects and access to extracurricular activities, arts programs and sports at no extra charge.
- the province prohibit boards and schools from fundraising to cover capital costs.
- the province track and publish an annual report on school-generated funds that includes information on amounts raised and costs covered, including any funds raised through arms-length foundations set up by boards, schools or school councils.

4. PARENT ENGAGEMENT AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL

While there is no quick fix or program that will ensure effective parent involvement, more work needs to be done to improve communication with parents about how they can support their children's learning.

People for Education recommends that

- the province, in cooperation with parents, develop policy and provide support that facilitates outreach and invitations to all parents, rather than focusing primarily on school councils and Parent Involvement Committees.
- principals, boards and the province focus on new ways of measuring the success of parent involvement that goes beyond school council participation. Indicators of success might include increased participation in parent-teacher interviews, more parents providing feedback to the school through tools like surveys, and parents' own reports about changes at home related to their interactions with their children about school.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Schools were sorted according to their postal codes into geographic regions. The distribution of respondent schools is representative of their distribution in Ontario.
- | Postal code region | % of schools in survey | % of schools in province |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Eastern Ontario (K) | 19.3% | 17.6% |
| Central Ontario without GTA | 12.2% | 15.5% |
| Greater Toronto Area | 33.3% | 35.0% |
| Southwestern Ontario (N) | 20.0% | 20.8% |
| Northern Ontario (P) | 15.1% | 11.1% |
- 2 Ontario Regulation 612/00, School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees, s.2. Retrieved from http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/regs/english/elaws_regs_000612_e.htm
- 3 Many schools indicated more than one role as their “most important role.”
- 4 Epstein, J. (2001). *School and family partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview; Henderson A., & Mapp, K. L., Johnson, V.R., and Davies, D. (2007). *Beyond the bake sale: The essential guide to family-school partnerships*. New York: New Press.
- 5 Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement*. Annual Synthesis 2002. National Centre for Family & Community Connections with Schools. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Texas. Retrieved from <http://www.seidl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 There is a statistically significant association between schools reporting communicating with parents by email and the number of parents attending a school council meeting ($\chi^2=38.868$ (1, N=716), $p < .01$, Cramer’s V=.233).
- 8 There is a statistically significant association between schools reporting having a school council website and schools reporting communicating with parents by email ($\chi^2=20.3$ (1, N=721), $p < .01$, Cramer’s V=.168).
- 9 There is a statistically significant association between schools reporting communicating with parents by email and schools reporting asking parents for input or feedback ($\chi^2=8.87$ (1, N=715), $p < .01$, Cramer’s V=.111).
- 10 EQAO. (2011). Teacher questionnaire, 2010-2011, Primary division (Grades 1-3) provincial results. Retrieved from http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/provquestionnaire/1011/G3_2011_TO_P01.PDF; EQAO. (2011). Teacher questionnaire, 2010-2011, Junior division (Grades 4-6) provincial results. Retrieved from http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/provquestionnaire/1011/G6_2011_TO_P01.PDF
- 11 Statistics Canada. (2011, May 25). Canadian internet use survey. *The Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110525/dq110525b-eng.htm>
- 12 See note 2.
- 13 Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010) *Parent Involvement Committees in Ontario*. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/factSheet_Fall2010.pdf
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- 15 Ontario Ministry of Education. (2011) Making a difference: A practical handbook for Parent Involvement Committee Members (draft). Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/HandbookPIC.pdf>
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- 18 Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010/11). Parents Reaching Out Grants, Project Guidelines. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/reaching.html>
- 19 People for Education online community. (2011). School council PRO Grants and Parent Involvement Fund. [Online discussion.] Retrieved from <http://schools-at-the-centre.ning.com/forum/topics/school-council-pro-grants-and?commentid=2468495%3AComment%3A33804>
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- 21 Ho, S.-C. E., & Willms, J. D. (1996). Effects of parental involvement on eighth-grade achievement. *Sociology of Education*, 69(2), 126-141.
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