

# Is Parent Involvement on School Councils Working?

By Diane Duma

## A PARENT'S STORY

HAVING BEEN FORMALLY EDUCATED IN THE CANADIAN PUBLIC school system, I embarked on a journey back into that same school system in 1990. This time though, I was a parent, a taxpayer, and an advocate for my children.

That year, a group of energetic parents formed a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in my local school. I was very interested but also nervous. I did not want to be part of a group that was focused on a one-time, here today, gone tomorrow issue. I wanted to be part of a group that would be there for the long run. I wanted to be an involved, informed parent. This group met my criteria.

In 1995, the province of Manitoba introduced legislation for Advisory Councils for School Leadership. This was seen as a "step up" from the old PTA that had functioned well to bring parents together, but lacked any "real" say in the very things that were at the heart of parental concerns. The Advisory Councils were seen as the solution to these walls and obstacles. For the first time, parents were acknowledged in the *Public Schools Act* and *Education Administration Act* as having input in curriculum, fundraising, discipline, policies, etc., even if only in an advisory capacity. Instead of parking lot discussions, parents with their schools could develop a consultative and collaborative relationship within a formally established process. It meant a lot of work and commitment. Councils would now be required to have public elections and regular communication with their parents, school staff, students and community as well as develop by-laws and procedures for conducting council business.

The Advisory Councils are now moving into their fourth year. I have participated in three councils at three different schools: early, middle and senior years. I have also talked to numerous parents around the province who are involved in their own councils. Each one has its own way of doing business, based on the various personalities within the group. Have the Advisory Councils really moved parents to a better place?

What has become very clear is that schools and school boards that want parental involvement will work toward it whether or not there is legislation. The legislation itself has done very little to break down the inherent obstacles that were there in the days of the PTA. For example, according to legislation, the principal is a member of the council. Having one's body at the table is one thing, having an active participant

is another. This person may choose to sit, observe and offer very little, or instead, be ready with pen in hand, agenda, calendar and note paper. The principal, as active participant, encourager, disseminator of information and supporter, is key in how well a council functions.

Those who choose not to take on the new "unwritten" job description are not held accountable in the legislation.

Have the Advisory Councils improved the dialogue between parent and teacher? I have seen issues discussed that have brought greater understanding of the challenges and concerns each face. But I have also seen controlled teacher involvement when a principal chooses to whom and on which topics the teacher will speak.

Advisory Councils also have a key role in advising their school boards. Here the legislation is very fuzzy. What constitutes giving advice? In regard to "advising the school board about the process of hiring and assigning principals", some councils want to be actively involved in the interview process. One board responded that a letter listing favourable qualities will do. The legislation also requires school boards to provide an opportunity for public consultation on the budget. But, for example, when parents want to discuss a raise in salary given to a superintendent, they are told it is a personnel matter and not within their jurisdiction.

The greatest failing of the Advisory Council legislation is that there are no consequences for those individuals that still want to maintain the walls between parents and the school system. There is little incentive to promote councils. Until they are truly functioning in an open, co-operative environment, their potential benefits, especially to students, are limited.

My hope for the future is that the politics and turf wars will slowly recede into the past. I also hope that parents will take a more active part in the education of their children and continue to persevere even when the going gets tough. ■

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