

# Counsel for School Councils

*School councils are more likely to be helpful if government guidelines are followed.*

**By Trudy Griffiths**

Elected school councils are mandated by the Ontario government for every publicly-funded school in the province. At present, some are more successful than others, and some schools have no school council at all.

School councils were established in two phases: first, Policy Program Memorandum (PPM) 122 in April 1995; and second, Ontario Regulations 612/00 and 613/00, in September 2001.

Regulation 612/00 stipulates that school councils can provide advice to the principal and the school board on almost any matter, including planning, implementation, and policy development. Excepted are personnel matters and issues pertaining to student confidentiality.

The principal and the school board are required to consider any recommendations made by school councils, and they have a duty to respond to a school council's advice by advising it of the actions taken in response to their recommendations.

Some people see school councils, and some school councils see themselves, as mostly fundraising bodies. While fundraising is certainly worthwhile, there is so much more school councils could — and should — be doing.

Regulation 612/00 states that “the purpose of school councils is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents.” School improvement planning seems a natural fit for school councils.

Members of school councils may or may not be aware that schools and school boards are required to develop action plans in response to their results on provincial tests.

All parents must be given the opportunity to contribute to the development of the plan, as well as react to both the assessment results and to the finished plan.

It is important to understand that the provincial tests stand out as highlights, special milestones in education, but that the real focus is the daily teaching and learning from kindergarten through grade 12.

Higher scores on provincial tests are nice, if they reflect real progress by the students. But scores are not the only benchmark, since the goal of school councils is to improve overall student achievement. The school improvement process can go well beyond a simple response to the EQAO results.

Schools and school councils' ultimate objective is to improve student achievement by enhancing the way curriculum is delivered, by creating a positive environment for learning, and by increasing parents' involvement in their children's learning at school and at home.

There must also be a mechanism through which schools can measure improvement and through which they can be held accountable for student success.

If schools and school councils are to really make a difference, the best way is to develop a clear vision and a good plan.

For this to work, the school and the school board must make the planning process transparent, giving parents and school councils access to accurate and neutral information about budgeting processes and policy development.

An effective principal views the school council as an powerful tool for creating a successful school community. The school will be more effective if parents, teachers, principal, community members, and students work together as a team.

The school council is an excellent medium for conveying to the principal the ideas and concerns of the school's students, parents, and community members.

The principal is the key to the success of the school council. This does not mean that the principal controls the school council's agenda or sets its direction. Rather, it means empowering the school council to fulfill its mandate.

The principal should consult with the council on matters of importance to the members, openly sharing information, providing the resources necessary for the council to communicate with the school community, and responding in a timely manner to the council's advice.

Unfortunately, some school councils are struggling. Their difficulties may be caused by an unreceptive or uninterested principal, or by conflicts between different factions.

Where Ontario's school councils are working, the principal recognizes that parental input is not interference, but rather a valuable contribution to the school's success.

It is important for all members of a school council to focus on their real purpose — the well-being and success of the students.

There is a great deal of information about school councils at [www.ontarioparentcouncil.org](http://www.ontarioparentcouncil.org), including the School Council Guide for Members. The Parent-to-Parent pages have an array of topics, including a section on School Improvement Planning that I strongly encourage you to consult.

The Ontario Parent Council has made repeated recommendations on how to strengthen the role of school councils and continues to believe that, with the proper training and support, school councils are an essential component of an effective education system.

*(Mrs. Griffiths is the parent of a child in public school in Dryden in north-western Ontario. She is a school council chair and the chair of the Ontario Parent Council.)*