

# Parent Power

## *Why is this scary thought?*

By John Pippus

It's not surprising that the usual suspects can't stand the thought of parents having an increased stake in making decisions as to how our public schools are run. After all, the existing bureaucracy and the teachers' unions have the most to lose, power-wise, as the steadily-increasing calls for **real** parent involvement are heard.

But what *is* surprising is the number of parents who echo this same position. The line goes something like this: "Oh, we shouldn't have any real say in running schools. We're too busy, and besides running a public school is so complicated it's best left to the professionals."

It's not just a few timid souls who think this way. It's a major obstacle that must be addressed head-on by school reformers who insist on nothing less than parents taking their rightful place in the education hierarchy.

At a conference held here in BC, about 200 parent leaders recently gathered to examine, among other issues, the implications of moving to parent-dominated school councils (that would have, ideally, broad-ranging power to control hiring and budget direction, as well as to evaluate both programs and staff). More than a few delegates expressed doubts that this would be a positive move.

But the concept of parent-based governance structures is alive and well in various places (including Canada) and can provide concrete answers as we move along the road to shared decision-making. Hundreds of private schools in Canada have been operating for years with simple, yet accountable, chains of command.

Take, for example, Southridge School, an independent school I had a hand in founding a few years ago. Parents are elected to positions on the

board of governors. They hire a principal, who in turn is charged with hiring the staff. This is site-based management with parent control and, for the most part, it works. After all, if it didn't, it's fair to assume that word would spread quickly and the clientele would leave in droves. The long waiting list is clear evidence to the contrary.

The governors do not get involved in micro-management. They know this is not their role. Instead, their focus is on the bigger picture. They have hired the best educational leader they could find, and they have faith in this person to get on with it. This kind of small, responsive and uncomplicated structure can be adopted by any provincial government with the resolve to make it happen.

And what about entire countries, like England and New Zealand, that have devolved significant power to parent-dominated school councils? I telephoned the principal of Kapanui School, a medium-sized elementary school in Waikanae, a town about an hour's drive north of Wellington on New Zealand's North Island. Principal Maureen Creasy had spent one year as a principal under the old system, with its highly-bureaucratic, centralized structure, but ever since New Zealand's sweeping reforms, she has answered to a school-based board of trustees, comprised of staff, community members, the principal and — importantly — a **majority** of parents.

"Having experienced both systems, would you go back to the old way?" I asked. Her answer was an emphatic: "No way! What's more, any principal would say this system is better!" I asked if the staff would say the reforms have benefited them. "Absolutely. Not only do the teachers have more say on spending money, there's more money to spend."

Ms. Creasy suggested one reason why there is more money is because it's no longer necessary to finance a large central bureaucracy, which she described as "heaps of people who sat around doing little."

I asked about the ability of parents to assume a major role. According to Ms. Creasy, "Boards are responsible for policy development. If they get involved in day-to-day management, it falls apart. Their role is governance and my role is management."

"In reality," she said, "Teachers are involved as well. Often the board will simply ratify policy developed by staff." Ms. Creasy pointed out that, because principals sit on the boards, joint decision-making is a reality. Hiring the principal is critical, according to Ms. Creasy. When a vacancy is posted, a board will typically bring in an outside principal as an advisor during the hiring process.

As for the parents at Kapanui School, Ms. Creasy said, "They feel they know more about the school — they feel they're told more. The new system is better."

The New Zealand experience shows the direction we must take. Increased parent involvement will necessitate: adequate training, increased support services, well-defined roles and a well-thought-out fallback position for the isolated cases where things inevitably go off the rails.

No one is claiming small-d democracy is without its pitfalls. But, with adequate preparation, fully-accountable local school councils will make our schools better places to be for all concerned.

*(John Pippus is the father of two high school students. He is the B.C. contact for OQE and the coordinator of The Parent Network.)*