Parent Engagement: School Councils are Not Enough
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Introduction

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ministry, 2009) reaffirms the provincial government's commitment to increasing student achievement, reducing achievement gaps, and bolstering confidence in our publicly funded education system. The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy has eight areas of focus. This paper will discuss one of these areas, school-community relationships, and specifically, the role of the school council in publicly funded schools.

This paper argues that school councils are inadequate structures that minimally support parent engagement policies. In fact, it will be demonstrated that school councils, in their current form, may actually retard the development of inclusive and equitable parent engagement practice. Parent engagement policies need to be reimagined to include structures beyond school councils that support parental involvement in schools.

The paper will begin by providing a brief historical context for the presence of school councils in publicly funded schools and then proceed by describing the role of the school council in contemporary schools. The discussion will then shift to an examination of current parent engagement research. I will conclude by presenting recommendations for improved parent engagement mechanisms in schools, and speculate about the future of school councils in our publicly funded education system.

Historical Context

School councils have not always been permanent fixtures in public schools. In fact, they are a relatively recent addition to our public education system. The permanent addition of the school council structure to public schools was first considered following a report made by the Ontario Parent's Council in 1994 (Ministry of Education, 2010). Just one year later, a Royal Commission entitled For the Love of Learning, recommended that principals and school boards begin developing structures to increase community-school partnership (Ministry of Education, 2010). In response to these recommendations, The Education Quality and Improvement Act was passed in 1997. This act enshrined the establishment of school councils, in schools across the province, into statutory law (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The Purpose of School Councils

The school council was formalized to mandate a degree of productive interaction between the principals and stakeholders in the community. It was hoped that the school council structure would provide a forum where student achievement was supported and schools were held accountable for their actions. The role and purpose of school councils is precisely described in Ontario Regulation 612/00.

> 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... A school council's primary means of achieving its purpose is by making recommendations in accordance with this regulation to the principal of the school and the board that established the council.
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> (Brown, 2009, p. 110)

Ontario Regulation 612/00 clearly defines the purpose and role of school councils. Parent's In Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy identifies the school council along with newly minted parent involvement committees (PICs) as the primary structures for engaging with parents and the broader community (Ministry of Education, 2010). Although exploring the merit of PICs is enticing this paper will remain focused the role of school councils. Parent's in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy states...

> School councils focus on increasing parent involvement within the school community as a key factor in supporting student learning and achievement, and they act as a direct link between parents and the school principal.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 24)

A synthesis of the legal parameters that pertain to school councils and the government's vision for school councils reveals some disparity. I would suggest that structures which are designed to engage parents require a mandate that extends far beyond 'making recommendations'. The Ministry of Education's current vision for parent engagement is supported by research, but the tools for accomplishing this task, specifically the school council, are outdated. The next section of the paper presents current parent engagement research, and then shifts to a discussion of how school councils might be reimagined to expand parent engagement in publicly funded schools.

Literature Review

The focus on parent engagement in the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is critical. The link between high student achievement and meaningful parent engagement is a well-documented phenomenon (Fan & Chen, 2001). However, researchers caution that the link between parent engagement and student achievement reveals a strong correlation, but does not constitute a causal link (Pomerantz et al. 2007). Parent engagement research clearly demonstrates that parental involvement does not increase student achievement, but parental involvement does appear to provide several benefits to pupils (Pomerantz et al. 2007).

In a recent review of parent engagement research, 'parent involvement' has been generally defined as the 'commitment of resources to the academic arena of children's lives (Pomerantz et al. 2007). Prior to the new millennium researchers in the parent engagement field have focused largely on the amount of time that parents commit to the academic lives of their children (Pomerantz, 2007). Recently, the field has shifted attention towards studying the quality of parental involvement in school-related activities (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001). The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis provides a complex and helpful understanding of the parent engagement process.

Researchers (Pomerantz et al. 2007) have divided parental involvement into two broad categories: at-school and at-home. Parents may be involved in their children's academic lives in variety of ways. At-school involvement includes but is certainly not limited to: attending school meetings, volunteering in a classroom, supervising children in the yard, or communicating with teachers. At-home involvement may include helping with homework, practicing skills for a school team, providing a quiet place to study, or going to the store to purchase supplies for a project. Both forms of involvement are positively correlated with student achievement.

Clearly there are opportunities for the lines to blur between at-school and at-home involvement. Pomerantz et al. (2007) acknowledge that these categories are far from discrete entities and that at-school and at-home forms of parental involvement are connected. Many researchers have attempted to isolate the impacts of specific forms of parental involvement. Unfortunately, the measurable impacts of most specific parental involvement strategies are statistically insignificant (Pomerantz et al. 2007). This has led researchers to conclude that the benefits of parental involvement on student achievement are produced through a cumulative effect of a variety of forms of involvement and specific strategies (Pomerantz et al. 2007).

In addition to the geographical nature of parental involvement, psychologists have also identified another dimension of parental involvement: skill development and motivational development (Pomerantz et al. 2007). Parental involvement may facilitate the development of cognitive skills in three significant ways. First, parental involvement may lead to an acquisition of skills that help children with specific learning tasks such as mathematics or spelling (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Second, parental involvement may help parents learn accurate information about their child's abilities and this may help parents to provide appropriate support (Epstein, 1987). Third, visible parental involvement increases accountability, and may encourage teachers to provide extra attention to the needs of the pupil (Epstein & Becker, 1982).

Researchers have also observed the potential for parental involvement to provide extrinsic motivation and develop intrinsic motivation in students. First, by involving themselves in the 'academic arena' parents communicate the value of school, and encourage similar values in their children (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Second, parental involvement in education models an active rather than passive relationship with schools and schooling. This encourages pupils to advocate for themselves and develop productive relationships with teachers (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Finally, parental involvement in school may help students become more comfortable with the idea of schooling and resultantly, more competent at school-related tasks (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Researchers have concluded that skill and motivational development work together to support student achievement (Pomerantz et al. 2007, p. 376).

> It is likely that parents' involvement in children's schooling enhances children's achievement through both skill and motivational development. Parents may provide resources that simultaneously cultivate children's skills and motivation. Moreover, when parents aid children in developing their skills, children may benefit in terms of their motivation… The reverse may also be true: The motivational resources provided by parent's involvement may aid children in developing their skills.
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> (Pomerantz et al. 2007, p. 376)

The research presented to this point has demonstrated the geographic and psychological dimensions of parent involvement. The literature review will now shift to an examination of the social dimensions of parental involvement and schooling. Multiple studies have shown that educational attainment by parents is positively correlated with parental involvement (Pomerantz et al. 2007). Not surprisingly, the impact of socio-economic status and educational attainment is particularly pronounced with respect to volunteerism at school. Referencing data from the U.S. Department of Education, Pomerantz et al. state:

> …volunteering at school is less common among less educated (e.g., 16% to 40% in 2003) than more educated (e.g., 54% to 62% in 2003) parents. Volunteering in school is also less common among Hispanic (e.g., 28% in 2003) and African American (e.g., 32% in 2003) parents than their European American counterparts (e.g., 48% in 2003).
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> (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p. 375)

Higher socio-economic status provides resources such as time for volunteer work. However, I hesitate to draw conclusions along racial lines. I am not uncomfortable with empirical evidence about race, but without being critical, this data communicates the message that African-Americans and Hispanics do not care, or want to volunteer in their children's schools, and I do not believe this to be the case.

The data about volunteering in schools raises many critical questions that are not addressed in the literature review including: What qualifies as educated? What qualifies as volunteerism? Were parents in all communities provided with opportunities to volunteer? Several researchers have asked similar critical questions and are cautious to draw positive links between social indicators such as high educational attainment, high socio-economic status, parental involvement and student achievement (Pomerantz et al., 2007). Pomerantz et al. (2007) states, "The effects of parents' school-based involvement on children's achievement are compelling in that they do not appear to be accounted for by parents' socioeconomic status or educational attainment." The links between these phenomena are not definitive. There is substantial evidence which indicates that parents with low educational attainment and low-socio-economic status have the potential to positively affect student achievement.

In an attempt to more deeply understand the qualities of parental involvement that matter, some researchers have shifted their focus away from macro-social factors and directed attention towards micro-social factors and parenting style. The parental involvement field has identified two forms of parenting that may be of assistance: autonomy-supportive and control (Ryan & Deci, 1987).

> …autonomy support is defined as allowing children to explore their own environment, initiate their own behaviour, and take an active role in solving their own problems. Controlling behaviour, in contrast, involves the exertion of pressure by parents to channel children towards particular outcomes (e.g., doing well in school) by regulating children through such methods as commands, directives, or love withdrawal.
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> (Pomerantz et al., 2007, p. 381)

These styles of parenting are characterized by four components: autonomy versus control, process focused versus person focused, positive affect versus negative affect, high potential versus low potential (Ryan & Deci, 1987). Researchers have determined that most parents exude a mix of these characteristics, and parental behaviours will vary depending on the context. Currently, there is some speculation that parents who subscribe to autonomy-support model facilitate better student achievement outcomes, but results are difficult to generalize (Pomerantz et al., 2007)

In the context of parental involvement in schools, the examination of parenting style seems productive. This research steers parent involvement research away from generalization about race, and socio-economic status towards characteristics of particular parents. I applaud the sophistication of this framework for understanding parental involvement because it shifts the search from the 'right' kind of parental involvement to 'effective' parental involvement, and confirms what parents already know; the same parenting strategies will not work for every child.

The multidisciplinary approach to studying parental involvement is a testament to the depth of the field. Researchers have determined that effective parental involvement includes geographical, economic, social and psychological dimensions. Together, researchers have enhanced our collective understanding of parental involvement. Current parent involvement research seeks to study the qualities of parental involvement rather than simply the quantity of parental involvement. In doing so, the academic field recognizes the need to shift parent involvement policy from an emphasis on increasing involvement to a renewed attempt at creating meaningful, supportive and productive partnerships between the home and school.

To review, the Ministry of Education (2010) has a vision for increasing parent engagement in schools, and the only formal tool for achieving this goal in schools is the school council. Ontario Regulation 612/00 states that the school council's primary means of supporting student achievement and increasing accountability is by 'making recommendations' (Brown, 2009). In light of parent involvement research, the vision to simply increase parent engagement and the tool for accomplishing this goal, school councils, are both inadequate. The next section of this paper uses parental involvement research to inform recommendations for improving formal parent engagement tools in schools.

Given, that parental involvement is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, it stands to reason that the tools available to schools should acknowledge and reflect these complexities. Unfortunately, the school council structure is outdated, and while it may provide a vehicle for discussing school effectiveness plans and fundraising it supports parental involvement in very limited ways. In the following paragraphs I make recommendations to reimagine, restructure and reengage parents and communities.

Reimagining, Restructuring and Reengaging

School councils serve important purposes but they do not provide comprehensive support for the current parent involvement policy. School councils are important but they are not effective tools for increasing parental involvement. If school councils were tools for increasing parental involvement participation on school councils would steadily grow. Instead, attendance at school councils tends to stagnate, dominated by the same circles of powerful parents from year-to-year.

The current school council structure presents barriers that limit parent engagement. Most school council meetings are held in the evenings, meet monthly, and follow a set schedule. Which members of the parent community might these practices exclude? School councils are also narrowly focused in their mandate. The discussions tend to include school data, school policy, school plans, school events and fundraisers. Who might these structures exclude? The evidence is compelling. School councils tend to engage highly literate, politically skilled orators, who have time to volunteer in the evenings.

School councils exclude many parents but they could be reimagined to include a mandate of parental involvement. Meetings might be held at different times during the day and throughout the month to encourage participation from diverse stakeholder groups. The discussions at the school council could be expanded to include the practical affairs of teaching and learning in classrooms and at home. With support and creativity, school councils might become places where parents meet to support each other, the school, and their children.

The U.S Department of Education indicates that parents in the United States are most engaged by general school meetings and parent-teacher conferences. The Department of Education indicates that two-thirds of all parents, regardless of ethnicity, attend these events (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This is powerful evidence that some structures in school are highly effective, and that I suggest that they are effective because they are inclusive. The Ministry of Education should consider adding inclusive structures such as general meetings and parent-teacher conferences to their engagement strategy.

Conclusion

School councils will continue to play an important role in schools, but alone, they are inadequate for addressing the complexities of parental involvement. Widening the focus of the school council has merit, but has the potential to make school councils less effective. The argument presented in this paper is simple reflection of what many educators have already recognized – school councils are not effective tools for improving parent involvement and engaging communities.

Many schools have effective parent engagement strategies that include structures that stretch far beyond the school council. Unfortunately, the parent involvement policy (Ministry of Education, 2010) lags behind schools and the needs that educators have already recognized with respect to parent engagement. The Ministry of Education needs to include a variety of tools to support an

effective parent engagement strategy. The vision for highly engaged parent communities will not be realized without support from additional formal structures in schools.

The last thing that school leaders need is more structures, rules, regulations and commitments. However, the formalization of effective tools such as parent-teacher conferences and general meetings in the parent involvement policy will ensure that schools invest in effective strategies. I fear that the current emphasis on school councils as the primary vehicle for parental involvement is misleading. Hopefully, PICs will help school boards to craft parent engagement policies that provide opportunities to utilize well-researched, inclusive strategies that respond to the needs of diverse communities and reflect the decidedly complex nature of parent engagement.

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