

# THE FUNCTIONS OF SCHOOL COUNCILS IN CANADA AND AUSTRALIA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the respective roles of school councils in Ontario, Canada and New South Wales, Australia. It explores the similarities and differences in the way school councils function in small schools as well as the perceptions of members about their roles and responsibilities. The findings have utility at the ministry/departmental level where policies regarding the creation and role of councils are formulated.

## INTRODUCTION

In most nations, small schools are part of the country's educational milieu. Certainly, in Australia and Canada, each with a huge land mass of which only part is densely inhabited, small schools are part of the less inhabited regions. Although Ministries of Education do realise that small schools have special problems and although they do try to make some provision for remedying those problems, they also tend to overlook certain features of those schools which make the implementation of certain policies very difficult or even impossible. A current example of this concerns the membership on school councils, and the roles and responsibilities of members of school councils.

The Ontario Ministry of Education formally mandated the creation of school councils in every Ontario publicly funded school in 1996. The policy was outlined in Policy Memorandum 122 which not only created the councils but laid down the categories of membership in them. The majority of members were to be parents but provision was also made for some teachers, support staff, community members and, at the secondary level, students. The councils were originally given advisory duties but only this year the word 'advisory' was dropped. No replacement for that word was made nor has any change been declared in the councils' function.

A substantial amount of research into the operation of urban councils has been conducted over the past two years. No research, to date, has taken place in Ontario's small schools and especially in small rural or remote schools. The opportunity for a comparative international study provided the motivation for such a study.

School councils are a recent phenomenon in the public education systems in the New South Wales education system. In New South Wales, the impetus for school councils began with the *School Centred Education* report (Scott, 1990). In this report, 'councils are seen as vital

elements in building a strong infrastructure for schools' and 'the recommendation for school councils ... develop closer links between schools and their communities.' (pp. 76-79). The establishment of school councils began slowly and, in some schools, was met with some resistance. In 1995 the Department of School Education placed the formation of school councils on its priority agenda in response to this slow rate of establishment. This prioritising of school councils led to most schools forming a council. By contrast, over the period 1990 -1992 in the Riverina region of New South Wales, the then Assistant Director General - Region supported strongly the creation of school councils through both financial incentives (a once only \$1000 grant to the school council) and professional training programs for all council members. This level of support meant that by 1994 over 90% of Riverina schools had school councils operating. However, by 1998, with numerous changes to the organisational structure of the Department and changes in key personnel, a number of school councils had dissolved or were in recess.

### **SOME LITERATURE**

The creation of school councils or boards is a world wide phenomenon of the past decade. In countries such as England, New Zealand, the United States of America, Canada and Australia, school councils have become important policy making organisations within schools. Feng (1997) observed that in many states of the United States of America, school councils have become part of the educational reform agenda for schools of the 1990's.

In the New South Wales education system, various policy documents about the roles, functions and responsibilities of school councils and their members have stressed the benefits for schools and staff when parental and community input into the provision of education occurs (NSW DSE, 1995; NSW DET, 1998).

The Ministry of Education and Training in Ontario has stated that the reasons for establishing school councils include: i) increasing parental involvement in the education of their child and hence the child's learning; ii) making the school system more accountable; and iii) providing advice to the school principal on a range of matters (MET Policy/Program Memo no 122, 1995).

Fullan and Quinn (1996) suggested two possible scenarios for the functioning of school councils. In scenario A, school councils can be regarded as a political policy fad and their creation is seen as an end in itself. In this scenario, the school responds by implementing the legislative requirements regarding membership, modes of election, and meeting other organisational/administrative requirements. This scenario is labelled the 'compliance orientation' by Fullan and Quinn (1996: 2-3). In Scenario B, these authors suggested that school councils become the means for creating a stronger and deeper partnership between parents, teachers and the whole school community for the purpose of improving the quality of education provided to the students. This scenario, Fullan and Quinn label the 'capacity-building orientation' (1996: 4-5), and they contend it can produce fundamental changes to the relationship between a school and its community which invoke the concepts associated with forming a learning community (Senge, 1990).

These orientations have provided a conceptual framework for the present study and the recency of school council introduction in both Ontario and New South Wales education systems prompted a detailed analysis of the roles and functions of these organisations.

## COMPARING THE ROLES OF SCHOOL COUNCILS

In both educational systems the roles and responsibilities of the school councils were developed to serve the local needs. As both educational systems have a relatively recent history on the establishment of school councils, a comparative analysis of the published ministerial/departmental policy documents on the stated roles and responsibilities of school councils was conducted. From our analyses, the school council's role can be categorised into five areas of commonality:

1. Status. The school council has a clearly identified advisory role to the school Principal and /or other educational administrative groups.
2. Policy making. This is where the school councils develop aims, priorities and goals for the educational program developed and offered at the school.
3. Policy Advice. Here the school council has an advisory role into the selection process for the principal and the setting of priorities for the educational resource needs of the school.
4. Budget functions. The school council's role is to work with the school principal to develop school budgetary plans that reflect the educational priorities, the strategies designed to meet educational needs and to achieve the goals identified in the school budget.
5. Accountability. The school council provides the primary forum and mechanism through which the educational goals and programs of the school, the plans of the school council and the achievements of students are made public to the community.

This comparison is shown in Table 1 below. The most striking feature of our analyses is the high level of similarity in the specific roles of the school councils in both systems.

**Table 1**  
**Comparative analysis of school council roles**

ROLES OR FUNCTIONS	CANADA ONTARIO	AUSTRALIA NSW
<b>1. STATUS</b>		
a) Advisory to the principal <i>(NSW - advise the principal)</i>	Yes	Yes
b) Advisory to the School Board <i>(NSW - advise the Assistant Director General (Region))</i>	Yes	Yes
<b>2. POLICY MAKING</b>		
a) Local school year calendar <i>(NSW - assess the needs of the school from time to time in areas such as starting and finishing times)</i>	Yes	Yes
b) School code of student behaviour <i>(NSW - determine local student welfare policies and the schools Fair Discipline Code)</i>	Yes	Yes

c) Curriculum and program goals and priorities <i>(NSW - Determine the aims and educational goals of the school)</i>	Yes	Yes
d) Community use of school facilities <i>(NSW - establish policies for community use of school facilities)</i>	Yes	Yes
e) Development, implementation and review of board policies at the local level	Yes	No
<b>3. POLICY ADVICE</b>		
a) Selection of the Principal <i>(NSW - Have representation on the interviewing panel for selecting the incoming principal)</i>	Yes	Yes
b) Extra-curricular activities in the school	Yes	No
c) School based services and community partnerships related to social, health, recreational and nutrition programs <i>(NSW - provide guidance for the principal on supplementary services required by the school)</i> <i>(NSW - determine broad policies of the school canteen)</i>	Yes	Yes
d) Local coordination of services for children and youth <i>(NSW - provide guidance for the principal on supplementary services required by the school)</i>	Yes	Yes
<b>4. BUDGET FUNCTIONS</b>		
a) Set school budget priorities <i>(NSW - Assess the school financial needs)</i> <i>(NSW - advise the principal on the implementation of the budget plan)</i> <i>(NSW - examine reports on expenditure provided by the principal at intervals determined by the council)</i>	Yes	Yes
<b>5. ACCOUNTABILITY</b>		
a) Responses of the school or school board to achievement in provincial and board assessment programs	Yes	No
b) School-community communication strategies <i>(NSW - establish effective liaison with other school/community committees to promote activities consistent with school policies)</i> <i>(NSW - present and promote a positive image of the school in the local community)</i>	Yes	Yes

- c) Methods of reporting to parents and the community  
(NSW - Provide an annual report to the school community on the activities of the School Council) Yes Yes

**6. OTHER**

- a) Preparation of the student profile Yes No

From Table 1, the high degree of overlap in school council roles and functions is evident.

In addition to these core educationally focussed roles, both education departments have stipulated a number of organisational, administrative and procedural roles for school councils. In Table 2, these further aspects of the roles and responsibilities of school councils and its constituent members are identified and compared between both systems.

**Table 2**  
**Organisational roles of school councils**

<b>ORGANISATIONAL ROLES</b>	<b>CANADA ONTARIO</b>	<b>AUSTRALIA NSW</b>
<b>Policy Making</b>		
a) Establish goals, priorities and procedures.	Yes	Yes
<b>Development/Training</b>		
a) Organise information and training sessions to enable members of the council to develop their skills as council members.	Yes	No
<b>Management Practices</b>		
a) Hold a minimum number of meetings per year.	4	Not stipulated Suggested 8
b) All meetings shall be open to the members of school community.	Yes	Yes
<b>Accountability</b>		
a) Communicate regularly with parents and other community members to seek their views and preferences with regard to matters being addressed by the council.	Yes	Yes
b) Promote the best interests of the school community.	Yes	Yes
c) Provide audited annual financial report to Ministry of Education/Auditor-General.	No	No
<b>Legal</b>		
a) School Councils are established and defined under an Act of Government.	Yes	Yes
b) School Council is the direct employer of all non teaching staff at the school.	No	No

### Representation

a) The minimum required proportion of parents elected as members.	50% (Parents)	63% (Parents)
b) Term of appointment/ election.	2 years 2 year cycle	1 year annually

Again, the remarkably similar organisational roles of school councils from both systems is clearly evident in Table 2. Included in Table 2 are two roles that are not present in Ontario nor New South Wales under the Accountability and Legal headings. These two roles and functions which are current and controversial in one Australian state for school councils occur in the state of Victoria. They have been added into the analysis to highlight other potential or future roles that school councils can be asked to adopt. These roles relate to the school council adopting the employer status for all non-teaching staff in schools and thus becoming directly responsible to the Auditor-General for the sound financial management of these funds. Also, it should be noted that in the later part of 1998, the Victorian government initiated a trial in selected schools in which the school council's role as the employer has been extended to the teaching staff, including the Principal. This initiative parallels practices in the New Zealand education system where each school's Board of Governors is completely responsible for the employment of all teaching and non-teaching staff. In neither the Ontario province nor New South Wales state education systems has this legal employer role been devolved to the school councils at this point in time.

### THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to focus on the operation of school councils in small schools and to seek school council members perceptions and views on the functioning of school councils and their roles as members of a school council. A purposive sample of small schools were selected. For our study a small school was defined as a school with a total student enrolment of less than 200.

In Ontario, although 16 schools were invited to participate in the study, only eight provided significant responses. Three of these schools came from the far north, one from such a remote area that the only way to reach the school was by float plane in the summer and ski plane in the winter. Three came from areas within a four hundred kilometre radius of Toronto, the provincial capital. Two small schools came from within Toronto itself, one being a French school and the other a school for aboriginal children. A total of 28 useable surveys provided the data for the analyses reported below.

In New South Wales, eight schools were contacted and six responded producing a total of 37 respondents. All schools were within a 130 km radius from Wagga Wagga in the Riverina region. Three schools were rural central (K-12) schools and three schools were primary schools - two being P5 schools (two teacher schools) in small rural communities and the remaining primary school being a P4 school with seven staff.

Although the number of responses was small, the content of the responses was remarkably consistent.

## FINDINGS

### *Membership*

Who were the members of the school councils? The answer to this question revealed a number of similarities in both systems. School principals, teachers, parents, and community members were represented in both contexts. In Ontario students and support/administrative staff were also constituent members but only in secondary schools. In Table 3 below the median number of people representing particular constituencies are reported.

**Table 3**  
**School council membership**

Type of Constituent	Ontario	New South Wales
Parent	6	4
Teacher	1	3
Community Member	2	2
Principal	1	1

School councils were predominantly formed in 1992 in New South Wales while it was in 1996 in Ontario. Usually a school council met 8 times per year in New South Wales as per the mandated requirements from Table 2 while in Ontario the school council typically met 10 times per year.

### *Role perceptions*

All participants were asked to respond to a series of 18 Likert style items in two areas dealing with: i) the degree of involvement in achieving its defined functions (4 items); and ii) providing advice on a range of education related matters (14 items). The three point Likert scale used for all items was 'a great degree', 'some degree' and 'not at all'. All items were drawn from the official policy documents of both education departments and the wording of each item was kept as close to the official wording as possible.

#### 1. Functions

Overall school council members reported similar levels of involvement in the following functions:

- i) establishing priorities and goals.
- ii) seeking the views of community members and parents about school matters.
- iii) reporting on school council activities to the school community.
- iv) promoting the best interests of the school within the community.

Establishing its priorities and goals, and promoting the best interests of the school within the community identified as activities that the majority of members were regarded as areas in which the school council spent a great deal of time. Seeking the views of community members and parents about school matters, and reporting on school council activities to the school community

were activities to which both system's councils gave 'some degree' of attention and time. Less than 10% of all respondents selected the 'not at all' option for these four statements about their school council's functioning.

## 2 Advisory roles

In this section of the study, participants were presented with items relating to three areas pertaining to the advisory roles of school councils. These were:

- i) school organisation issues. These were: the school calender, school budget priorities, selection criteria for the school principal, school district plans, and school improvement plans;
- ii) educational issues. These covered: the code of student conduct and behaviour, curriculum offered, reporting to the school's community, the range of school based services provided, monitoring educational authority policies, and preparing a school profile; and
- iii) partnership issues. These were: community use of the school's facilities, provision of extracurricular activities, and community partnerships in social, health or recreational programs.

In the following tables, all results are reported as whole percentages.

**Table 4**  
**Advice on school organisational issues**

	% A great degree		% Some degree		% Not at all	
	NSW	ONT	NSW	ONT	NSW	ONT
Advice on school-year calender	14	43	40	14	39	43
Setting school budget priorities	68	11	19	46	5	36
Selection for school principal	30	4	27	21	35	75
Responding to school district plans/programs	16	11	73	57	5	29
Planning for school improvement activities	43	46	51	36	0	18

The trends in the responses from school councils suggest that both have similar levels of input and providing advice on responding to school district plans/programs, and planning for school improvement activities. In Ontario school councils have a much greater input into the construction of the school-year calender while in New South Wales, council members have a much greater level of advice on setting school budget priorities and the selection for school principal.



**Table 5**  
**Advice on educational issues**

	% A great degree		% Some degree		% Not at all	
	NSW	ONT	NSW	ONT	NSW	ONT
The code of student conduct and behaviour	76	57	19	29	0	14
The curriculum offered at the school	8	11	70	50	16	36
How the school reports to its community	27	21	62	64	5	14
Examining the range of school based services provided to students	16	4	68	64	11	32
Monitoring educational authority policies within the school	43	40	46	54	5	18
Preparing a school profile	54	40	35	29	3	32

The response patterns from both New South Wales and Ontario school councils show quite similar trends in their perceptions of their advisory roles on educational issues. In most situations the members believe they have some input into these matters. New South Wales members reported having a higher level of input and provision of advice (by a 20% margin) on the code of student conduct and behaviour and the curriculum offered at the school.

In the following table, Table 6, school council members responses to partnership activities are reported.

**Table 6**  
**Advice on partnership issues**

	% A great degree		% Some degree		% Not at all	
	NSW	ONT	NSW	ONT	NSW	ONT
Community use of the school's facilities	11	7	65	50	19	39
Provision of extracurricular activities in the school	19	4	51	57	24	39
Seeking community partnerships in social, health or recreational programs.	16	7	49	68	30	25

Generally, the response patterns from the school councils on partnership issues show a high level of similarity in the level of input and advice that they provide to the school on each of these three items.

Following the series of Likert scale items, a set of six open ended questions seeking written responses from the schools councils members was included. These six questions have been grouped into three areas focussing on identifying the school council members' perceptions of:

- i) areas in which the council functions well and how the school council has benefited the school;
- ii) where the school councils should focus their efforts and whether school councils should have greater responsibility for things that happen within the school; and
- iii) identifying the weaknesses and challenges facing school councils.

The analysis of Ontario and New South Wales council members' responses to the open ended questions follows.

***Where the councils do a good job and how they benefit the schools?***

The New South Wales and the Ontario council members indicated that the presence of the councils has increased the amount of communication between the parents and the schools and this provides parents with an opportunity to become more involved in the schools. Some school council members commented that their councils have assisted the Principal in working through issues by acting as the "sounding board" before an issue becomes a school guideline or policy. The areas where the school councils in New South Wales appeared to view their contributions as most beneficial included: discussing problems with their communities, community awareness of school activities, student welfare and discipline policy, setting school budget priorities, and in providing opportunities for pupils.

While similarities exist between the New South Wales and the Ontario school council members with regard to where they see the councils as being most beneficial, some Ontario council members noted the importance of providing a cultural context for school policy direction and promoting safe school issues. Also, the presence of the school councils in Ontario has helped strengthen relations between the school and the English as a Second Language (ESL) community, according to a school council member.

Many of the Ontario council members viewed fund-raising as an important component of what the school council does, notwithstanding that the topic of fund-raising is absent from the roles and responsibilities of the school councils as outlined by the Ministry of Education and Training. According to some New South Wales council members, one of the benefits of the current infrastructure of the school councils has been the separation of the representation function from the issue of fund-raising responsibilities.

Both groups viewed the benefits of the school councils primarily in terms of increasing the involvement that parents play in the operation of the schools. This involvement may range from the purchase of playground equipment to giving input related to the "hard issues" that Principals must often deal with in the school. As one NSW respondent noted *"more eyes and ears in the management and smooth running of the school."* In addition, most respondents indicated that it is gratifying when successful school programs are effectively communicated to the communities and the communities respond favourably to the work of the school councils.

*Where the school councils should focus their efforts and suggestions as to whether the school councils should have greater responsibility for things that happen within the school.*

There were similar suggestions for where the school councils should focus their efforts and whether the school councils should have greater responsibility for things that happen within the schools from the New South Wales and the Ontario respondents. The majority of council members viewed improving communication with their school communities and promoting the positive aspects of their schools as essential to where the councils should focus their energies. As one NSW council member wrote *"promote the school to attract more pupils and promote policies that enable pupils to reach their full potential."*

Council members in Ontario suggested increasing their input with respect to school trips, school budgets, codes of conduct, policies related to the closing of schools and to fund-raising ideas. The NSW council members suggested greater attention with regard to student issues such as: assessing and reporting, tighter controls on canteen policies, discipline and student welfare policies, and developing the direction of the school in conjunction with the Principal.

Increasing the responsibility and say of council members for things that happen in the schools was greeted with a fairly even split between those on either side in both Ontario and New South Wales. Those in support of increasing the role of the school council indicated that parents are key players when it comes to educating their children and emphasised that council members represent their communities. According to a few respondents, the parents and the students have a better knowledge of what is good for their schools because they are so directly involved in the educational system.

Other council members in both countries remarked that parents do not want too direct a role in the day-to-day operations of the schools because parents lack the knowledge base to get involved in many decisions made in school. The suggestion was made that *"many Ontario parents are not knowledgeable about the laws and regulations governing much of the operation of the schools and parents do not have the time to learn about it either."* A similar sentiment was expressed by a NSW council member in the following comment *"I think the school should be run by the Principal and staff. I think the school council is there for support and discussion. The Principal is there because he wants to be running the school and we, as a council, should support him."* In addition, some Ontario and New South Wales council members expressed concern that the councils may become agents of special interest groups because the members of these groups often have the time and the desire to become involved in the school councils.

One respondent remarked that the school council should have a collaborative relationship and not focus so much on issues of greater or lesser responsibility. In general, the NSW council members felt that the councils have enough responsibility while the Ontario councils appeared to be more in favour of suggesting that the roles and responsibilities of the school councils should be expanded or at least clarified for them.

A few respondents in both Ontario and New South Wales did note that some viewed the school councils as there to serve the needs of the school Principal and this, therefore, affected the autonomy of the school councils. As one NSW member stated *"a perception of some people who have served on the school council (and some serving) is that they are just a rubber stamp for whatever the Principal and executive staff of the school want."* Others suggested that the school councils are not a rubber stamp for the Principal and that these councils can be integral to developing a positive image of schools in their respective communities.

### *The weaknesses and challenges of school councils.*

With respect to the weaknesses and the challenges facing school councils, there appeared to be areas of commonality between the respondents in Ontario and New South Wales. Both groups indicated that the scope of reference for school councils is sometimes vague and that the councils often lack direction and support from their Ministry of/Department of Education and Training. In addition, both groups noted that the councils need to educate the parents and the public in terms of the good work that the councils do for the schools and the communities.

Both groups viewed the involvement of persons on the council who were there only to promote their own agendas as being very detrimental to both the operation of the school councils and the communities. The rapid changes to the educational sector were criticised by councils in both New South Wales and Ontario because the council members felt they have not been fully informed of these changes, nor are they well prepared to deal with the backlash from parents with respect to these ongoing changes. In the case of Ontario, the removal of the advisory label and the restructuring of Ontario's school board system has left many school councils wondering where they fit within the educational community. A number of the New South Wales council members noted that their councils are expected to do too much, with too little time and with very limited funds.

Within the Ontario school councils data, the problem of sustained membership on the school councils appeared to be more prevalent than in New South Wales. In addition, some Ontario council members identified as both a weakness and a challenge the lack of council members from representative ethnic groups within their communities. A few council members commented that some school councils are not truly representative of the school at the regional level and that these councils are often hampered by the fact that English is not the major language of communication. Furthermore, with the closing of some small schools, it may be difficult for parents to join an existing larger council and feel that they have a role to play. These Ontario council members also discussed the need to reduce violence among primary students in a culturally acceptable and effective way. Council members in New South Wales also identified monitoring student behaviour and keeping ahead of the drug problem as two major concerns that require constant attention from their school councils.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is interesting to note that while there are similarities between the school councils in Ontario and New South Wales, as this analysis indicated, there are also clear differences that have evolved since school councils were established in each country. In terms of the membership of the councils, the Ontario Government has outlined the minimum requirements for the composition and operation of the school councils (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1995). The NSW Department of Education and Training has permitted each school to decide how many members the council will have, how many seats will be reserved for parents, how many for staff and so on. However, there are two limits on this freedom: parents and members of the community must make up the majority of the members of the council and no one group can be so large as to out-vote all the rest (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998).

The aim of the school councils in both Ontario and New South Wales is "to ensure that the whole community is involved with all the important decisions made by the school" (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1998). While the NSW councils appear to have sufficient numbers to support their activities, this is not the case in Ontario. Council members in

Ontario expressed concern over the lack of participation by the community members, and the Aboriginal community council members noted that often the councils do not reflect or consider cultural concerns when decisions are being made.

Council members in both New South Wales and Ontario indicated their displeasure over the possibility of councils being taken over by special interest groups who do not represent the community. Members also expressed an interest in being involved in developing policies related to a number of areas within the schools but were less certain about whether they should be involved in curriculum development. Most councils saw their roles as including interactions amongst the community, involvement in the administration of the school, the distribution of decision-making power amongst parents, and, in the case of Ontario, fund-raising.

Council members in New South Wales and Ontario criticised the cutbacks in funding to education. However, in Ontario, the rising tensions between the teachers and the provincial government with regard to Bill 160, The Education Improvement Act, led some council members to comment that these kinds of disagreements are not healthy for the educational system.

While it is true that school councils have the potential to be key players in the Ontario and the New South Wales educational communities, there are still a number of challenges that must be overcome with respect to defining more clearly the roles and responsibilities of these councils (Wignall, 1996). In addition, in the case of Ontario, serious consideration needs to be given to ensuring that the councils reflect the composition of their communities. At the present time, this seems to be an unlikely occurrence. When we compare the responses of the schools councils in both countries to the two scenarios proposed by Fullan and Quinn (1996), it is evident that the 'compliance orientation' has been met by all schools and, in many schools, this orientation seems to be their *modus operandi*. However, there are some promising signs expressed by individual members of school councils. They envisage their school councils can or will evolve into facilitators creating stronger and deeper partnerships between parents, teachers and their school community. Here, the 'capacity-building orientation' labelled by Fullan and Quinn (1996) has its origins and is evident as council members focus on i) improving the quality of education provided to the students, and ii) producing significant changes to the relationship between a school and its community as they work towards building a learning community (Senge, 1990).

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