

SCHOOL ADVISORY COUNCILS - ARE THEY WORKING FOR THE STUDENTS, THE PARENTS, THE SCHOOLS?

What does a school council do?

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What's your school council supposed to do?

Volunteer at fundraising events? Help children with their reading skills? Co-ordinate school special events? Talk about money? Promote education?

If you talk to council members, they most certainly do all those things, even though many of them are still unclear about their role.

In the five years since they were created by the Ontario government, school advisory councils have seen some spectacular successes, along with a fair amount of frustration.

Ken Thurston, the York Region public board's superintendent of schools with regional responsibility for school councils, says the principal, the chairperson of the council and council members must be able to work together to achieve success.

As he travelled across Ontario as a member of the Education Improvement Commission, Thurston heard the same complaint about school councils over and over again.

Fundraising alone won't make a difference to a child's education.

A "lack of clarity in their role" holds councils back and causes frustration among members, Thurston was told.

Communication, too, was a problem: too little, with information hard to get from school boards and other bodies, or too much.

"They send us every memo and every curriculum document," Thurston heard from some council members.

But the public school board has adopted some American guidelines for making their school councils more effective.

Gord Kerr, co-chairperson of the school council at Whitchurch Highlands Public School in Whitchurch-Stouffville and a former member of the Education Improvement Commission, introduced the new program, based on studies by Dr. Joyce Epstein at Johns Hopkins University.

Kerr adapted some of Epstein's recommendations as a framework for Canadian school councils and the public board has approved its use in York Region schools.

The Epstein framework outlines six ways that parents can effectively contribute to the successful operation of their school council:

ing skills;

- By making positive connections between school and home;

- By volunteering at their school;

- By encouraging learning at home (with support from the educators who can help parents help their children with homework and educational initiatives at home);

- By taking part in the decision-making process; and

- By co-ordinating activities with community agencies so that children recognize they're part of a bigger community.

Kerr added two more recommendations of his own: increasing respect among principals, parents and teachers through social events where the members meet in less formal settings; and carrying out fundraising with a specific goal in mind.

"Fundraising alone won't make a difference to a child's education," Kerr said.

Leslie O'Connor, council co-chairperson at St. Mark School in Stouffville, would agree, although the Catholic school board has not adopted the Epstein recommendations.

Councils, O'Connor says, have given legitimacy "to the advice that parents do have for their school".

More than a year ago, council members lobbied the York Catholic school board for a second Catholic elementary school in Stouffville. The board listened — a new school is slated to be completed by the fall of 2001.

But citing a lack of clear direction, many parents, principals and community members have become frustrated deciding how best to help the school and their children.

When legislated into existence in 1995, councils were basically left on their own. A study offering guidelines came about two years later from the EIC, making recommendations on how to encourage more effective parental and community involvement in education and urging parents to participate in the planning process for school improvements, among other things.

But improving student learning is the main purpose behind councils, Kerr said.

At Whitchurch Highlands, Kerr, his co-chairperson Shawn Nisbet and principal Bill Reynolds have used recommendations from the Epstein study to build a volunteer base.

Nisbet, a longtime parent volunteer, spends about six weeks on the phone every fall, she says, interviewing prospective parent volunteers to find out how they'd like to be involved in the school.

Innovative thinking and making good use of volunteers also resulted in the 17-Acre Wood project at the school.

Instead of replacing a climber that had to come down because of safety concerns — and that would be used by only one segment of the school population — the school council's environmental committee decided to do something that would benefit the everyone.

The project includes two outdoor classrooms, one a type of arbour, the other a mini-Stonehenge. Nature trails are being planned and parts of the yard are being naturalized.

Changes are in the works for school advisory councils. Council members will face new challenges in the near future when the Ministry of Education is expected to come out with new legislation governing councils.



Gord Kerr, co-chairperson of Whitchurch Highlands Public School council, helped create guidelines for their effective operation.

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