# INSPIRED PARTNERSHIPS

## School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta

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## FOREWORD

*Michele Mulder, Executive Director, Alberta School Councils' Association*

The year is 2013, *Inspiring Education* is coming to life through a new Education Act, a regulatory review, policy shifts, and most importantly changes to the way those involved in education think about shared governance, curriculum design, student assessment and community engagement. Education systems at all levels, community school, school division, and provincial, are evolving to better meet the needs of Alberta's students.

Parents (and by 'parents' we include significant adults in children's lives – Elders, grandparents, guardians, foster parents, mentors) need to be involved and engaged, not only in their children's learning, but beyond. What better way to find that environment for engagement in the education system at all levels, and to gain a better understanding of education and changes, than to be part of a school council?

School councils are well positioned to provide parents with many opportunities to be engaged in the school, division and the provincial level through the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA). Parents can influence the culture of the school, provide thoughts and ideas about education, and offer a perspective that is needed to inform decision-makers, as Alberta embarks on a new education frontier.

Never before have school councils been so important in this changing landscape.

And never before has it been more important to "take the pulse" of school councils, learn of the opportunities and potential for school council growth. This report, its findings and recommendations will guide school councils and those who work with them, and the ASCA, so we can better support school council participants across the province.

ASCA is proud of the contributions parents make every day through their school council. ASCA's vision of "*An effective school council in every Alberta school*" will be achieved in our province – parents in every school participating through their school council, collaborating with principals, school staffs, superintendents and school boards – to support student learning success, and help make the philosophy of *Inspiring Education* a reality.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Paulette Hanna and Jim Brandon*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The eleven findings and nine recommendations generated through analysis of three provincial online surveys and data generated from 32 interviews in 12 schools and four school jurisdictions provide a framework to inform school council efforts to support *Inspiring Education's* vision of students as *engaged thinkers* and *ethical citizens* with an *entrepreneurial spirit*.

In our analysis, many school councils are better positioned than ever to support school and school system efforts to foster student success in these transformative directions. Many school councils are now very well integrated into the functioning of their schools and – to a lesser extent – their school systems. Effective school and school system leaders understand that school councils do important work and make a variety of significant contributions to school and division learning cultures. Through two-way connections – partnerships – school councils help educators and school trustees to better understand community contexts and, at the same time, take steps to help schools maintain positive learning environments.

Three aims guided this study. First, we sought to understand principal, superintendent, trustee, and school council member perceptions of school council effectiveness. Investigating ways in which school councils can positively impact school and system planning was our second aim. A third intention was to examine the influence that school council learning, networking and resources have on school council effectiveness.

Our analysis indicates that forms of collaboration and partnering have continued to evolve over the past few years. The steady efforts of the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) and other education partners over this period have yielded a number of resources that have helped parents, trustees, teachers, and educational leaders to more fully understand both the benefits of, and processes to strengthen the two-way partnerships that characterize effective school councils in this province. In this respect, many highly effective school councils are now participating as members of the *collective leadership* teams in many Alberta schools. This is good news for Alberta students in view of the evidence advanced by Gordon and Louis (2012) that in schools "with more democratic collective leadership practices that include parents in influential positions, student achievement is higher" (p. 89).

Relationships are foundational to school council effectiveness. The principal's approach to working with members of the school council is particularly important in the relationship

building process. Relational trust between the principal and the chair is and will continue to be a vital contributor to how well the school council functions as an inspired partner in student success as the educational system moves forward with the transformational agenda.

Engagement in school and system planning can play an important role in strengthening parent-educator partnerships. Participants in our study consistently indicated that school council members feel valued when their voices are included in such planning processes. More importantly, our findings reinforce research that demonstrates a strong relationship between such involvement and improved student learning (Gordon & Louis, 2012). Though the linkages between school council involvement and measures of student success are indirect, study participants and previous research provide reason to believe that such engagement can be an important contributor.

Councils of school councils can serve as important vehicles for strengthening system-level planning and deepening community engagement during this time of educational transformation. Evidence from the four cases is instructive on the benefits of fostering inspired partnerships of this kind. Ongoing connections with school council representatives across a school system can be of tremendous help to leaders navigating change. Sustained community dialogue on important and emerging educational initiatives and issues can build support and/or guide course adjustments to better address varying needs. These networks can provide an important two-way communication conduit between school communities and their school boards.

As the Ministry of Education moves forward with *Inspiring Education,* the voice of school councils at the provincial level will assume growing importance. ASCA plays a key role in effectively conveying the views of its members to the Ministry and to other stakeholders through the wide array of consultation opportunities provided by the province. Our study shows that school council and system level participants are highly appreciative of the varied avenues of leadership and support provided by ASCA. The attention to diverse approaches to working with schools and divisions is seen as a major strength. The annual ASCA Conference is viewed as an important and effective learning event and networking opportunity.

Steady progress on meeting school council learning needs is also reported. While the challenge of active school council membership persists, participants consistently reported that when more specific help is needed parents generally step forward. There is no shortage of evidence to support the contention that school councils are evolving and moving forward as inspired partners making significant contributions to student success in Alberta.

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## INTRODUCTION

### School Councils 2013: Engaged Members of Collective Leadership Teams

Alberta's education system is recognized as one of the world's best. Students do consistently well on international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS). Yearly measures of student, parent and teacher satisfaction are steady and strong. Even as the system readies itself for transformation to better support students as *engaged thinkers*, *ethical citizens* with an *entrepreneurial spirit*, a steady stream of internationally acclaimed researchers have weighed in on Alberta's educational strengths (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, 2012a; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Levin, 2010; Whelan, 2009).

The results of our mixed methods collective case study research support Fenton Whelan's (2009) assessment in *Lessons Learned: How Good Policies Produce Better Schools*:

> *If I had to explain why Alberta has been so successful, it would come down to a way of working throughout the system, which emphasizes three things: focus, flexibility, and collaboration. (p. 187)*

Findings from our six-month study support this view. The data presented indicate that effective school councils clearly *focus* on supporting student success. As Whelan observed, "to a degree unusual in school systems, everyone is focused on improving student outcomes" (p. 187). This was certainly evident in each of the 12 schools we visited in May and June of 2013. Each school council had its own way of working in this direction, reflecting the *flexibility* Whelan identified as a key feature of the Alberta system. A variety of approaches to supporting student *success* – student engagement, learning, and well-being – were demonstrated in the participating elementary, middle, and high schools. In Alberta, no standardized template dictates a one size fits all mandate for school councils. Parents and educators in the case settings we studied are *collaborating* in ways that best suit their community and school contexts in keeping with Whelan's analysis, "The culture of collaboration and partnership runs deep…. (and) creates the alignment, mutual understanding, and common sense of purpose" (p. 188).

Our research suggests that the very nature of *collaboration* and partnering is evolving to the point where effective school councils are increasingly well integrated into the functioning of their schools and, to a lesser extent, their school systems. In this respect, many highly effective school councils are now participating as members of the *collective leadership* teams in many Alberta schools. Collective leadership is total amount of influence attributable to all the

participants in a given educational system: teachers, parents, principals, district office staff, and community members (Wahlstom, Louis, Leithwood & Anderson, 2010, p. 7). This is good news for Alberta students in view of the evidence advanced by Gordon and Louis (2012) that in schools "with more democratic collective leadership practices that include parents in influential positions, student achievement is higher" (p. 89).

### Evidence Enhanced School Council Effectiveness: 1995 – 2013

The fact that many school councils in this province are now so well integrated into the leadership fabric of their schools reflects a trend that has been steadily gaining momentum over the past 18 years. A number of factors have contributed to this trend. Two important contributors supported by the documentary evidence investigated in this study are *policy learning* and the ongoing attention to research evidence.

In contrast to current general state of comfort with and appreciation of school councils' involvement in schools, educators were largely apprehensive and skeptical when the construct of school councils was introduced in Alberta along with a bold package of other ideologically driven reforms in the early and mid 1990s (Levin, 2001; Mazurek, 1999; Taylor, 2001). In speculating about how the role of the school principal might be altered in the first ten years of the twenty first century, Yanitski and Pysyk expressed concerns that were on the minds of many educators:

> *A significant factor will be the degree to which the provincial government initiates policy that places school councils in positions of influence at the school site. If school councils become more like "mini-school boards," principals will become more like superintendents. The issue here is how governance of schools will be managed over the next decade. Many school councils have indicated that they are not interested in evolving into de facto school boards. If the provincial government listens to these councils, governance will remain the domain of the school boards. (1999, p. 174)*

To the credit of the Alberta government, a more evidence based policy course has been steered since the creation of school councils in 1995 under the *School Act*. In contrast to policy directions in places like New Zealand and England, school councils in this province have not wavered from the path of serving schools and divisions as collective associations "who work together to effectively support student learning" (Alberta School Councils' Association, 2007, p. ii). In addition to yearly government accountability surveys, evidence to provide policy direction for school councils has been provided in four major reports summarized in Table 1.1 below.

TABLE 1.1 MAJOR ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCIL STUDIES 1999 – 2008

| Year | Report | Author(s) | Commissioned By |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1999 | *School Councils – Next Steps: The Minister's Review on School Councils*. | MLA Working Group | Minister of Education |
| 2004 | *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation* | Kaleidoscope Consulting | Alberta Learning |
| 2008 | *Alberta School Councils Survey 2008: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges* | H. Raham and K. Bennett, The Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE) | Alberta School Councils' Association |
| Yearly | Parent Involvement in Child's Education and School Council | Corporate Planning Branch, Strategic Services Division, Alberta Education | Alberta Education |

Over this time period a number of resources have been developed to help parents, trustees, teachers, and school administrators to more fully understand both the *whys* and *hows* of collaborating in ways that support student success. This current volume provides additional evidence of Alberta school councils continuing to focus on supporting student engagement, learning and well-being – *student success.* It also provides a number of descriptions, examples, strategies, and stories to demonstrate the successes and challenges encountered en route.

## Organization of the Report

The structure of this report is shaped by the three questions that guided our research. The section that follows this introduction outlines our research design. It details the processes used to gather and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data and provides additional information on the four school system cases examined. Sections three, four and five focus on findings, relevant literature, interpretations and recommendations related to a single research question. Section Three addresses matters related to school council effectiveness. Planning for student success is the focus of Section Four. Section Five examines the ways in which school council effectiveness is impacted by learning, networking and resources. The conclusion reviews the

evolution of the ways in which school councils have become increasingly engaged in Alberta's educational system and comments on ways in which the collective efforts of parents can increasingly support Alberta students on their journeys to becoming more engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial citizens.

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## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Research Purposes

The purpose of this study was to examine current stakeholder perceptions of school council effectiveness in Alberta. In addition to gathering evidence about school council contributions to student success in 2013, we were also interested in comparing these current stakeholder perceptions with those reported by Helen Raham and Kristen Bennet in *An Alberta School Council Survey: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges* (2008).

Our research had three more specific intentions. A first aim was to identify and understand principal, superintendent, trustee, and school council member perceptions of school council effectiveness. Investigating the nature and impact of school council contributions to educational planning and student success at the school and jurisdiction levels was our second aim. A third aim was to better understand the state of school council learning and networking along with access to resources.

### Research Questions

Over the course of the research planning, data collection and analysis, the three more specific intentions within the larger purpose of the study were distilled into the following three research questions:

1. HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERS, PRINCIPALS, SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL TRUSTEES PERCEIVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCILS?

2. IN WHAT WAYS DOES SCHOOL COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND JURISDICTION PLANNING CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS?

3. WHAT IMPACTS ARE SCHOOL COUNCIL LEARNING, NETWORKING AND RESOURCES HAVING ON SCHOOL COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS?

An overarching additional question was considered throughout this inquiry: **In what ways have stakeholder perceptions of school council effectiveness changed since the 2008 survey?**

## Mixed Methods Research Design

This study utilized a convergent parallel mixed methods research design. In keeping with the principles and assumptions of this research approach, qualitative and quantitative methods were combined to provide a better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012). Our rationale for using a mixed methods approach was to gain insights from both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative online surveys provided the opportunity to gather data from a large number of people and to generalize results, while the qualitative interviews, focus groups and field notes allowed for a richer, more in-depth exploration of perspectives within four specific school division cases.

Qualitative data collection and analysis in the four school divisions was informed by collective case study methods (Stake, 1995). A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2007). "*Bounded* means that the case is separated for research in terms of time, place or some physical boundaries" (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). In a collective case study (Stake, 1995) multiple cases are described and compared to provide insight into an issue. The issue under investigation within the bounded system of the Alberta school system in 2013 is "stakeholder perceptions of school council effectiveness". Such inquiry called for a range of research methods to do justice to the complexity of the case and to facilitate cross-case synthesis and explanation (Yin, 2009).

The convergent parallel mixed methods research design placed equal emphasis on the two forms of data: qualitative and quantitative. Each data source was collected independently and then analyzed separately. The researchers then integrated the quantitative and qualitative data during data analysis, following processes outlined by Creswell (2012, pp. 548-560). The organization of this report also reflects the convergent parallel design. Selected research literature, qualitative and qualitative results, interpretation and recommendations are presented in three major sections of the report. Each section is based on one of the study's three research questions.

Data were collected from the following sources in March, April, May, June and August of 2013:

- Individual and/or focus group interviews in four representative school divisions
    - School council chairs and/or school council members
    - School principals
    - School board chairs
    - School trustees
    - School superintendents
- Field notes from the site visits

- Documents and artifacts related to school council operations
- Online Surveys
  - School Survey
  - School Division Survey
  - Learning Session Participant Survey

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected throughout this six-month study. All interview and focus group data, survey data, field notes and documents were reviewed and analyzed through iterative processes of reading, rereading and review.

### *Interviews and Focus Groups*

A total of 32 individual and focus group interviews were conducted in May, June and August of 2013 in 12 schools and four central offices within four Alberta school divisions. The four school divisions in which we conducted our in-depth case studies were chosen with consideration for representation from four of the five geographical zones into which school systems are divided by the Ministry of Education. We also sought to balance representation between Catholic and Public School Divisions and to include participants from small rural, mid-size rural, urban and urban centers. The school divisions in the study are located in Zone 2/3 (Edmonton and area), Zone 4 (Red Deer and area), Zone 5 (Calgary and area) and Zone 6 (Southern Alberta).

Interviews were conducted in each of the school divisions with the superintendent of schools, the school board chairperson or trustee representative, the school principal (or in one case, an administrative team representative) and school council members from three schools. The schools were chosen by the superintendent and included a high school, a middle school or junior high school, and an elementary school. Interviews with school council members from each of the schools varied. Some interviews were conducted with the chair of the school council alone, while other interviews included the chair and one or two other council members.

Analysis of the interview data was informed by the view that "coding is deep reflection about, and thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data's meanings" (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014, p. 72). In first cycle coding, summaries and field notes from the interviews and focus groups were initially read in their entirety to a get a sense of their content and context, without imposing a specific analytic lens. Each researcher independently read the texts and looked for themes to determine coding categories. The two researchers then compared their reflections and initial coding to establish consistency, to become familiar with the overall content and to determine the level of interest in relation to the research questions. Emerging themes were identified and analyzed.

In our second level coding, pattern codes were developed (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014, p. 86-104). Using the descriptive categories and criteria that emerged from the initial data analysis, more detailed pattern codes – larger categories or themes – were created to form the basis for the analysis. Then the research literature was consulted to further inform and validate the categories and themes selected. Themes that emerged from the participants' accounts form a comprehensive picture of the collective experience. In this way, we were able to establish which themes and sub-themes fit together in a meaningful way.

## School Survey

The online school survey was comprised of a total of 44 questions. School council participants were invited to participate in the survey through an initial email invitation distributed to Alberta school principals in March 2013. A follow-up, reminder email was sent in April. The survey data collection occurred over a six week period and a total of 636 surveys were completed.

Seventeen of the survey questions employed a five-point scale. In several cases during the analysis phase, the original five-point scale in the survey was collapsed in order to increase the clarity of the data for reporting purposes. Scales were collapsed into "bottom three box" and "top two box" scores. Bottom three box scores represent the percentage of respondents who selected responses that are considered negative taken from the bottom portion of the five point scales; for example – strongly disagree, disagree and neutral. The central value of the five-point scale is included in the "bottom three box" score in an attempt to counteract acquiescence bias, thereby providing a more conservative interpretation of participants' responses. Top two scores represent the percentage of respondents who selected responses that are considered positive; for example – agree and strongly agree.

## School Division Survey

The online school division survey was comprised of a total of 16 questions. School superintendents and school board chairs were invited to participate in the survey through an initial email invitation distributed in March 2013. A follow-up, reminder email was sent in April. The survey data collection occurred over a six week period and a total of 47 surveys were completed.

Seven of the survey questions employed a five-point scale. During the analysis phase, the original five-point scale in the survey was collapsed in order to increase the clarity of the data for reporting purposes. Scales were collapsed into "bottom three box" and "top two box" scores. Bottom three box scores represent the percentage of respondents who selected responses that are considered negative taken from the bottom portion of the five point scales; for example – strongly disagree, disagree and neutral. The central value of the five-point scale is included in the "bottom three box" score in an attempt to counteract acquiescence bias,

thereby providing a more conservative interpretation of participants' responses. Top two scores represent the percentage of respondents who selected responses that are considered positive; for example – agree and strongly agree.

## *Learning Session Participant Surveys*

The online learning session participant survey was made up of a total of 20 questions. A number of school council members who had recently participated in an ASCA led learning session were invited to complete the survey through an initial email invitation distributed in May 2013. The school division survey was comprised of a total of 16 questions. School superintendents and school board chairs were invited to participate in the survey through an initial email invitation distributed in May 2013. A follow-up, reminder email was sent early June 2013. The survey data collection occurred over a six-week period and a total of 79 surveys were completed.

Seven of the survey questions employed a five-point scale. During the analysis phase, the original five-point scale in the survey was collapsed in order to increase the clarity of the data for reporting purposes. Scales were collapsed into "bottom three box" and "top two box" scores. Bottom three box scores represent the percentage of respondents who selected responses that are considered negative taken from the bottom portion of the five point scales; for example – strongly disagree, disagree and neutral. The central value of the five-point scale is included in the "bottom three box" score in an attempt to counteract acquiescence bias, thereby providing a more conservative interpretation of participants' responses. Top two scores represent the percentage of respondents who selected responses that are considered positive; for example – agree and strongly agree.

## *Cross Case Synthesis*

In keeping with the principles and assumptions of convergent parallel mixed methods research, qualitative and quantitative methods were combined to provide a better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself (Creswell, 2012). As detailed above, study design placed equal emphasis on the two forms of data: qualitative and quantitative. Each data source was collected independently and then analyzed separately. We integrated the quantitative and qualitative data during data analysis, guided by processes outlined by Creswell (2012, pp. 548-560). Selected research literature was then consulted to deepen our understanding of the mixed data and to aid our interpretations and recommendations.

Each of the four school jurisdictions we examined in this study provided various forms of evidence that indicated they believe that parents who are informed and committed to their children's education can and do make a difference in the quality of learning - both at home and at school. The Board Policies and Administrative Procedures of these four school divisions clearly support the establishment of school councils to provide valuable advisory assistance to principals, superintendents and boards. School councils in these systems are seen as important links between the divisions and the school communities within their boundaries. School councils bring forward their perspectives about education, the needs of schools, and concerns of their communities. This parental and community involvement is recognized and encouraged in making informed decisions to ensure the best possible education for the children in the divisions.

The following short profiles of the four divisions were adapted from their Annual Education Results Reports and Three Year Education Plans accessed from each division's website.

## *Battle River Regional Division*

Battle River Regional Division is located in Alberta Education Zone 4 and is representative of a mid-size, central Alberta school division with the Board Office located in the city of Camrose. It serves approximately 6,396 students in 41 schools including nine Hutterite Colony Schools, Battle River Online School, PACE Outreach School, the Learning Together Program, Cornerstone Christian Academy and the Women's Shelter. French Immersion is offered to grades K-9 in two schools in Camrose. The majority of the students come from farms, acreages, villages and small towns in a predominantly rural setting while the student population in Camrose is approximately 2,113 students. In 2011-2012 the district employed about 334 full-time teachers, 67 part time teachers, and 480 non-teaching staff.

## *Calgary Catholic School District*

Calgary Catholic School District is representative of a large urban Catholic school district situated in Alberta Education Zone 5. It is the largest Catholic school district in Alberta, serving 49,000 students in Calgary, Airdrie, Cochrane, Chestermere and Rocky View County in 105 schools with a wide range of programs. Students are educated and empowered from kindergarten to Grade 12 through the mission of *Living and Learning in the Catholic Faith*, through the delivery of a variety of instructional programs to its diverse urban student population. In 2011-2012 the district had 4,979 full and part time employees, which included 3,187 instructional staff, 1,314 support staff, 318 caretaking staff, 151 exempt staff and 9 senior officers.

### Horizon School Division

The Horizon School Division is representative of a small rural school jurisdiction located in southern Alberta. The jurisdiction extends south and north from Coutts on the Canada/US border to Lomond in the County of Vulcan. The economy of the area is primarily dependent upon agriculture and the oil and gas industry. This Alberta Education Zone 6 Division provides education services to approximately 3,550 students and consists of 16 schools of various grade configurations including one Christian Alternative School, 18 Hutterian Brethen schools, and three Outreach schools.  Most of the communities within the Horizon School Division are small, with the Town of Taber, population 8,000, being the largest. Over the past ten years, a substantial population of Low German Mennonite families from Mexico and other Central American countries has moved into the area.

### Parkland School Division No. 70

Situated on the western edge of Edmonton, surrounding the city of Spruce Grove and the town of Stony Plain, and stretching approximately 100 km west to the Pembina River, Parkland School Division serves the educational needs of approximately 9,600 kindergarten to grade twelve students. Parkland has 22 schools in addition to a number of alternate sites including, Connections for Learning, two high school outreach programs and an institutional program. Parkland School Division is representative of a mid-size jurisdiction located within Alberta Education Zone 2/3. Its central office is located in Stony Plain. Over the past twenty-five years the area's economy has gradually moved from an agricultural base to one that is becoming increasingly industrial through the development of major power generation and coal mining projects. The jurisdiction employs approximately 522 full-time equivalent certificated teaching staff and 359 full-time equivalent support staff.

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## SCHOOL COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS

### Introduction

The current *Alberta School Council Resource Manual* (2007) begins with a joint statement from then Minister of Education, Honourable Gene Zwozdesky and then President of the Alberta School Councils' Association, Trina Boymook, in which they state:

> *Parents are vital to the continued strength of our education system and their involvement plays an important role in student success. Through involvement in school councils parents have an opportunity to influence the delivery and outcomes of school programs.*

Research substantiating this contention has grown significantly over the past decade. We begin this section by highlighting key findings from this strand in the educational research literature, and then referencing four Alberta studies. We then summarize three key findings and interpretations before outlining two recommendations related to our first research question:

> HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERS, PRINCIPALS, SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL TRUSTEES PERCEIVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCILS?

### School Council Effectiveness – Highlights from Recent Research

Educational research consistently supports the Alberta view of school councils as collective associations "who work together to effectively support student learning" (Alberta School Council Resource Manual, 2007, p. ii). Three themes in this literature are instructive. First, parental involvement in schooling is best constructed as a *partnership.* Second, the development of relational trust is fundamental to effective partnerships in the school community. Third, while role clarity itself is very important, the role of principal in purposefully and skillfully engaging parents as partners is pivotal.

One of the largest studies of North American schooling found that higher-performing schools solicit more input and engagement from a wider variety of stakeholders and provide for greater influence from teachers, parents and students (Wahlstom, Louis, Leithwood & Anderson, 2010). Similarly, evidence from Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) indicates that parent engagement in school is nurtured when parents come to understand that such involvement is a key part of what it means to be a responsible parent, when parents believe they have the skills and know-how to make meaningful contributions to the school's efforts and when they believe that school staffs, as well as their own children, value their participation in the school.

John Hattie's summation of several research studies is that "parents need to hold high aspirations and expectations for their children, and schools need to work in partnership with parents to make their expectations appropriately high and challenging, and then work in partnership with children and the home to realize, and even surpass, these expectations" (2009, p. 71). Robinson (2011) indicates that if the purpose of engaging the community is educational benefit for children, then leaders' efforts should go into involving parents in ways that create a stronger *educational partnership* between the school and its parents because that is the strategy that is most likely to deliver the intended results (p. 135). Levin (2008) points to a growing body of literature about how to build positive relationships with parents. "Most important is a genuine commitment to partnership coupled with respect and ongoing effort to create dialogue and mutual understanding" (p. 112). Schools with strong community ties tend to have safer school environments, better student attendance, and greater parent-school trust (Robinson, 2011, p. 133).

Bryk and Schneider (2003) indicate that trust, in particular *relational trust* (as distinct from *contractual* trust), should be considered foundational to the building of productive relationships. The key to sustaining long-term motivation is in building relational trust. Relational trust is formed when "each party in a role relationship maintains an understanding of his or her obligations and holds some expectations around the role obligations of the other" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 20). Robinson (2011) underlines the importance of relational trust:

> *If leaders have the knowledge and skills required to build trust they not only will achieve stronger community-school relationships but also will have created a social foundation from which parents and teachers can work together to improve students' engagement and achievement. (p. 136)*

Gordon and Louis (2012) found that in schools "with more democratic collective leadership practices that include parents in influential positions, student achievement is higher. The role of the principal in interpreting district engagement policies and in creating and communicating school-level expectations for parent engagement is critical" (p. 89).

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010) advise districts to develop policies and clear expectations that support community and parental engagement. They further suggest a system of incentives principals may need to increase the influence of parents and community members within schools.

> *District engagement policies can have long lasting effects on principals. The more principals get used to interacting with the community, the more open they become to involving outside stakeholders in school improvement efforts. The role of the principal in interpreting district engagement policies and in creating and communicating school level expectations for parent engagement is critical. (p. 11)*

The central role of the principal in school council success is seen as a double-edged sword in Ryan's (2006) analysis. Principals are in positions to create barriers and to dominate or they "can help create participatory decision-making structures and foster collaborative work among council members, clearly define goals and roles for parents and the council, and act as an information provider, motivator, and friend of the of the council" (p. 87).

### School Council Effectiveness – Learning From Four Alberta Studies

Studying the effectiveness of Alberta school councils has been a relatively regular occurrence over the past decade and a half. Findings from these studies have also proven to be supportive of school council efforts to evolve ways of working with others to enhance student learning. In addition to Alberta Education's yearly *Parent Involvement in Child's Education and School Council* reports, evidence from the following three school council studies is addressed: *Minister's Forums on School Councils Final Report: School Councils - Next Steps* (1999); *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation* (2004); and *A Survey of Alberta School Councils: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges* (2008). At least three themes are evident from close reading of these documents. One theme is the consistent finding that stakeholders believe that school councils are effective. A second theme is the very consistent finding that school council members in Alberta do not wish to serve in school governing roles. The third theme is the importance of relationships in well-functioning school councils.

## *Minister's Forums on School Councils Final Report (1999)*

The first major effort to assess school council effectiveness resulted in the 1999 publication of *School Councils - Next Steps*: *Minister's Forums on School Councils Final Report:* (1999). When school councils were made mandatory, it was intended that their effectiveness in providing Albertans with meaningful involvement in education be reviewed after three years. In October of 1998, then Minister of Education, the Honourable Gary Mar, formed an MLA Working Group to examine how well school councils were fulfilling their mandate.

An extensive two-stage process yielded generally positive results, the MLA Working Group

> *found that all stakeholders wanted school councils to continue to involve parents and the community in the education of children in Alberta. The Working Group also found that most school councils were functioning well. (p. 6)*

Data were collected and analyzed from 2,020 completed workbooks and seven day-long public forums held in centres in every region of the province. Four key findings from this review proved to be very influential in the pathway taken by the Ministry of Education in its subsequent work with school councils. First, school councils were seen to be functioning quite effectively:

*All stakeholders indicated school councils have an important role to play in the education of children in Alberta. Attendees at public forums generally indicated that school councils were a key venue for involving parents in the education of their children. The workbooks received by the Working Group appeared to indicate a positive evaluation of the effectiveness of school councils with 87% of responses falling within the Always Effective and Usually Effective range. (p.14)*

Second, the "workbook responses and the comments at the public forums for the most part indicated that council members were satisfied with playing an advisory rather than a decision-making role" (p.14). Third, the importance of the principal's role in school council effectiveness was clearly recognized. Fourth, to help school councils better fulfill their advisory responsibilities a number of steps were outlined to build their capacity. Recommendations emphasized improving resources, access to ongoing education for both parents and educators, and support for the expansion of *Councils of School Councils*. With regards to the latter:

*Evaluations from many of the attendees at the public forums indicated they valued the opportunity to meet with members of other school councils. This interaction allowed them to discuss common concerns and share solutions to common problems. Establishing Councils of School Councils would provide school councils within a district with the opportunity to share their best practices. It also would allow school councils to develop common positions on matters of common interest and aid in communicating those positions to their board of education. Such Councils of Councils already exist in several areas of the province. A number of school councils identified this approach as one of the "best practices" which helped make them highly effective. (p. 16)*

The MLA working committee remained steadfast in its advocacy for community representatives to remain as a mandatory membership requirement for school councils. The report also advised that

*school councils have matured greatly and are now ready to go on to their next level of development. The advisory role of school councils and the accountability of schools will be enhanced if principals and teachers are made non-voting members of school councils. This would put principals and teachers in a position similar to that of superintendents who participate in school board meetings but who do not vote. (p. 18)*

The report called for another review in five years and for Alberta Learning to pay particular attention to the following in the interim:

- *the role of the principal;*
- *effectiveness of information materials and training;*
- *training needs of council members;*

- *recruitment of community representatives; and*
- *recommendations implemented as a result of this report. (p. 19)*

## Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation (2004)

Commissioned by Alberta Education, *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation* (2004) was the second major study of school council effectiveness. An extensive, cross province focus group and interview consultation yielded 16 recommendations. Seventy-one school council members participated in focus groups and 28 interviews of principals and trustees were held. Seventeen school jurisdictions were represented. One of its results was the following set of characteristics of effective school councils:

### Table 3.1 Characteristics of Effective School Councils (Kaleidoscope Consulting, 2004, p. 16)

**Purpose**
- Have an appropriate focus (e.g. enhancing student learning by contributing to the positive school environment)
- Have clearly defined, achievable goals (e.g. advising principal and board on matters the council considers important)

**Membership**
- Are representative of the entire school community, including those specified in legislation and regulation
- Have an inclusive membership recruitment process

**Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships**
- Have clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- Establish constructive relationships with principal and board
- Carry out activities that further the purpose, including those specified in legislation and regulation
- Provide input to principal and board on important matters, e.g. school and jurisdiction plans, budgets, programs, policies, facility use, results
- Respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others (e.g. teachers, principals, jurisdiction administrators, other parent organizations)

**Communication**
- Promote the council's purpose, activities and results with parents and the larger school community
- Consult with principal on issues of interest to parents
- Seek input from parents and the school community
- Receive feedback on advice provided

A second set of additional indicators of school council effectiveness "as seen by people directly involved in councils" was also developed. These include:

- *Strong relationships*
- *Strategic planning*
- *The primary focus of the council is the advisory role in education matters/enhancing learning*
- *Voice of council is representative of the school community*
- *A safe and respectful environment to question and discuss*
- *A problem solving/goal oriented process*
- *Authentic involvement and meaningful input*
- *Utilizing the efforts of volunteers strategically*
- *Working as a team (p. 18-19)*

## A Survey of Alberta School Councils: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges (2008)

Raham and Bennett (2008) conducted the most recent major study of Alberta school council effectiveness in Alberta. *A Survey of Alberta School Councils: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges* was a research inquiry undertaken on behalf of ASCA by the Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (SAEE). The report was based on school survey data collected from 813 principals, 420 school council chairs, and 235 school council members. At the school division level, data from 45 superintendents and 47 school board chairs was gathered through a second survey.

A generally positive picture of school council effectiveness was presented. From their more distant perspectives, superintendents and board chairs saw the situation more positively than those at the school site, where councils indicate that they are grappling with the demands of membership recruitment, ensuring representation, transitioning to a more involved advisory role in planning and forming positive working relationships among the council membership and its community partners. Discrepancies between participant groups are noted in a number of areas.

Council effectiveness in *building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders* was rated most highly by all five sets of respondents. More than 70% of principals rated their councils as being 'very effective' on this indicator, followed in descending order by council chairs (60%), members (54%), jurisdiction chairs (51%) and superintendents (42%).

The results from the survey provide evidence that Alberta school councils are successfully fulfilling their mandate to consult widely with the school community on educational matters. Approximately 90% of principals, council chairs and members responded positively to the question: Does your council seek advice from the school community?

While generally satisfied with the overall effectiveness of their school councils "only 21% of principals, 16% of council chairs, and 15% of council members perceived their councils as "very effective" in their ability to influence school priorities for improving student achievement (p. 17).

Among the challenges identified is the continuing focus of many Alberta school councils on fundraising, despite their mandate to provide advice on school improvement, and widespread difficulties in recruiting council members. Six major recommendations are offered to strengthen the capacity of school councils as they move forward in fulfilling their mandate.

1. *Create opportunities for meaningful involvement in educational planning.*
2. *Strengthen communication between principals and councils.*
3. *Provide explicit training in new roles and areas of need.*
4. *Increase council impact at the jurisdiction level.*
5. *Address the challenge of council membership.*
6. *Expand communication and network building among councils. (pp. 71-72)*

With respect to the sixth recommendation, the authors encourage increased council to council collaboration and networking through "stronger umbrella organizations (Council of School Councils) at the jurisdiction level", and increased use of online connecting tools (p.72).

The report also recommended additional research to help identify best practices:

*A series of in-depth case studies of school councils in a variety of settings could yield insights regarding their practical inner-workings and promote broader understandings of effective practices and conditions of success. These case studies and the lessons learned could be shared on the ASCA website as part of the School Council Development program. (p. 73)*

## Parent Involvement in Child's Education and School Council Report (2013)

Alberta Education's 2013 *Parent Involvement in Child's Education and School Council* report conveyed results of annually commissioned telephone surveys of 1600 parents, 800 teachers, 400 principals, 350 trustees and a large number of high school students.

A high proportion of parents who indicated they were familiar with the school council reported that the school council influences decisions made at their child's school (79%). When the same group of parents was asked about the effectiveness of the school council, 83% reported that the school council is an effective way of being involved in their child's school. A high proportion (83%) of parents, school board trustees (81%), teachers (80%) and principals (80%) reported that school council is fulfilling its advisory role (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 8). These results are quite consistent with those from the past five years. Other results related to perceptions of

school council involvement in planning are presented in section four of this report.

With this background of highlights from existing research and insights from four previous studies of school council effectiveness in this province, we now move on to present the findings, analysis and interpretation of the data collected in the current study, Inspired Partnerships: School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta.

## School Council Effectiveness – Findings, Analysis, and Interpretation

This sub-section presents and discusses three main findings that emerged from the data collected in relation to research question one:

> **HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERS, PRINCIPALS, SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL TRUSTEES PERCEIVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCILS?**

Finding One indicates that effective school councils involve members in a number of meaningful ways. Related to this, we also found that this meaningful involvement is an important contributor to student success. Finding Three underlines the significance of relationships in supporting school council effectiveness.  These three findings, our analysis and interpretations are now presented.

### *Meaningful Involvement*

Data gathered through surveys and interviews in the present study indicated that school councils are doing much more than fulfilling the legal requirement that all Alberta schools must have one. School councils are now very well integrated into the functioning of schools and school systems. Stakeholders appreciate their work and see them as a fundamental and vital part of their schools.  A principal expressed this point very emphatically: "The school council does not realize how much they influence by asking questions and giving feedback. We wouldn't go forward without their support" (Principal One). A school council member from another setting expressed her appreciation for school councils "I am glad we have a school council. A good way to stay informed and to air concerns" (School Council Member Seven).

The data we collected also indicated that school councils are now more meaningfully involved in school division improvement processes than reported in previous Alberta studies. All of those interviewed in our case study visits reported that school council chairs were regularly invited to participate in a variety of division planning, operational, and policy development processes. Examples of such processes include developing vision and mission statements, providing feedback on the Three Year Education Plan and engaging in the annual budget development cycle. One council member observed that being involved in the division's Three Year Education Plan assisted the local council in providing advice that helped the school align its plan to the

division's document. A rural respondent appreciated "that council chairs have opportunities to speak with their superintendents in planning meetings and to pose challenging questions around a variety of educational issues" (School Council Member 6).

Many rural council participants reported that their school council voice was heard at board meetings through their local trustee, who attends all monthly school council meetings. Often in these cases, trustees share information and perspectives from the school division to help inform the council. On the other side of the partnership, trustees learn about school council accomplishments and concerns to better inform their work at the school board level.

While the interview data we collected in the 12 schools consistently indicated that the case study school councils were meaningfully involved in system improvement processes, the provincial survey data represented in Figure 3.2 shows that just 58% of the school level respondents believe this to be true.

**Figure 3.2**     **Our school council plays a meaningful role in school district improvement processes (School Survey)**
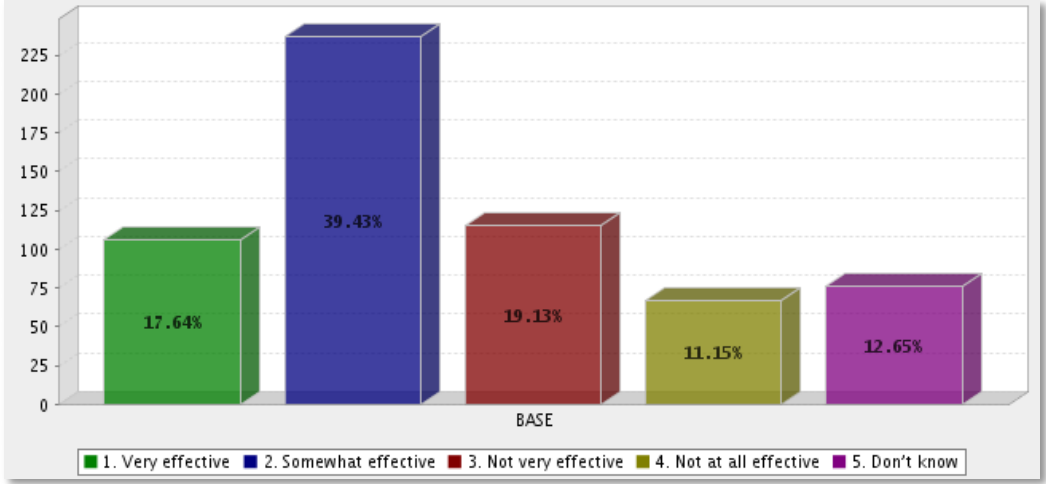


The interview results from the participating trustees and superintendents were very similar to the results obtained from the school council member interviews. Participants described school council members being involved in school division processes such as giving input on policy, budget and human resource profiling. As Figure 3.3 indicates, 82% of division survey respondents believe that school councils play a meaningful role in division planning and improvement processes. This pattern is similar to that reported in other studies of Alberta school councils. Superintendent One stated:

*school councils are very effective. Through councils of school councils, chairs are sharing their councils' beliefs and needs. This helps central office and the board to know what is going on in the different school communities. Parent voice is being heard.*

Trustee One viewed the role of school councils as evolving: "There is a general evolution for school councils to become more active on the key issues that affect student learning."

**Figure 3.3      Our school councils are meaningfully involved in system improvement processes. (School Division Survey)**
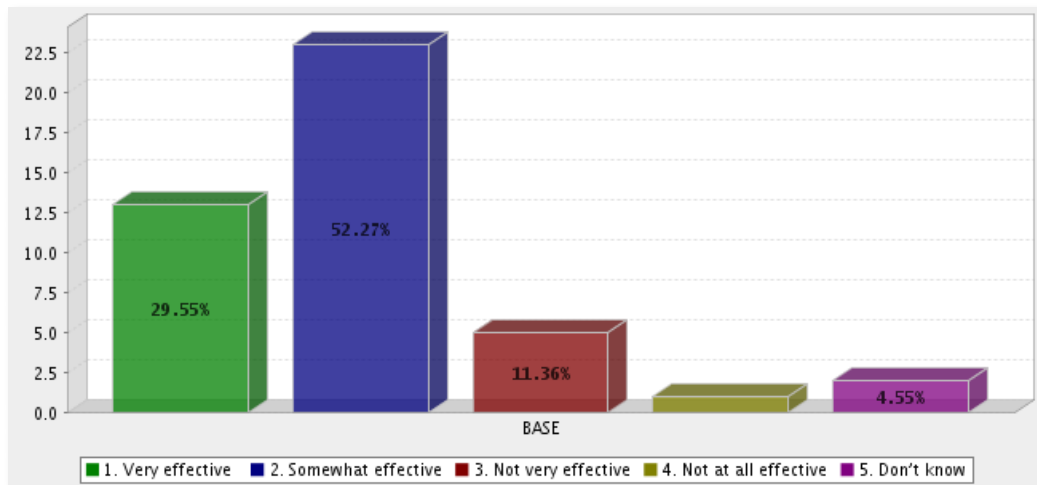


### *Linkages to School Success*

School councils feel valued when their voices are included in school and system improvement processes. School Council Member Two stated: "We always have a say. The principal is always at the meetings and our voice is heard." Though the linkages to student success are indirect, stakeholders at both the school and system levels believe that school council involvement is a significant contributor. Data from our case study interviews indicated that school council members firmly believe they influence school priorities for improving student success. When parents are provided with forums in which they can ask questions, share opinions, and hear other views on educational issues, true community partnerships thrive. In such settings, parental engagement contributes advice on a range of decisions that support teaching and learning.

Particular reference was made that school councils do important work and make significant contributions to school cultures. In Principal Three's view, "They are helpmates by being active in the school period. They have a vested interest. They ask questions about results and how students are learning." Other school council participants felt they were improving the learning

environment by volunteering in schools in various ways. Some talked about school level activities such as running hot lunch programs, book fairs and breakfast clubs. Others discussed the classroom work of school council volunteers. Activities of this sort include assisting in the classroom at the teacher's direction, raising funds for field trips, serving as guest presenters, and helping to develop materials to enhance instruction and learning. Such enrichment support made it easier for teachers to focus on teaching and learning. "They (school council members) do what they can do so that teachers can focus on their jobs" (Principal Three). The chair of a large high school council described her mission as "helping to create an environment where students feel safe and supported and teachers feel appreciated and respected" (School Council Member 17).

The survey data in Figure 3.4 indicate that 69% of the school respondents believe that the school council was effective in influencing school priorities for improving student achievement. From a more distant perspective, Figure 3.5 shows that 89% of surveyed trustees saw a link between school council actions and improved student achievement. Interviewed division respondents consistently indicated that school councils play an important role in supporting schools in general ways and that this support can lead to improved student learning outcomes. As Superintendent Four explained:

*Over the past five to seven years we've come to more fully understand the value of creating ongoing, learning-oriented relationships with our school councils. We expect our principals to work with their chairs and councils to help parents better understand all parts of the education system and ways that they can contribute to making our schools more positive places for students to learn and grow.*

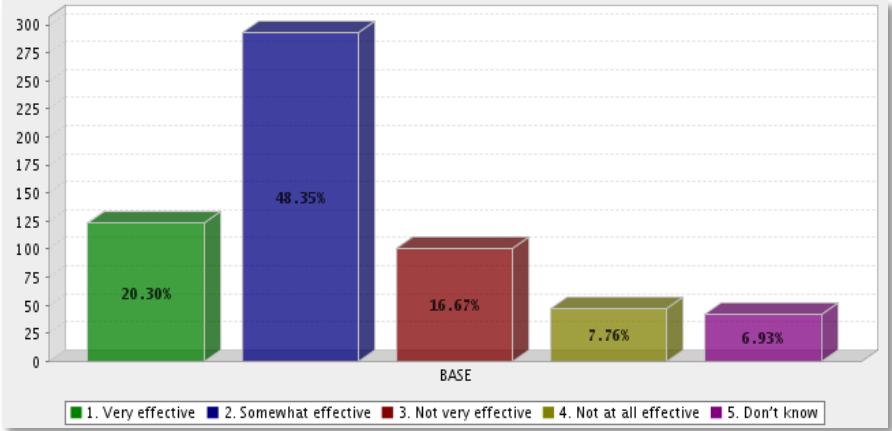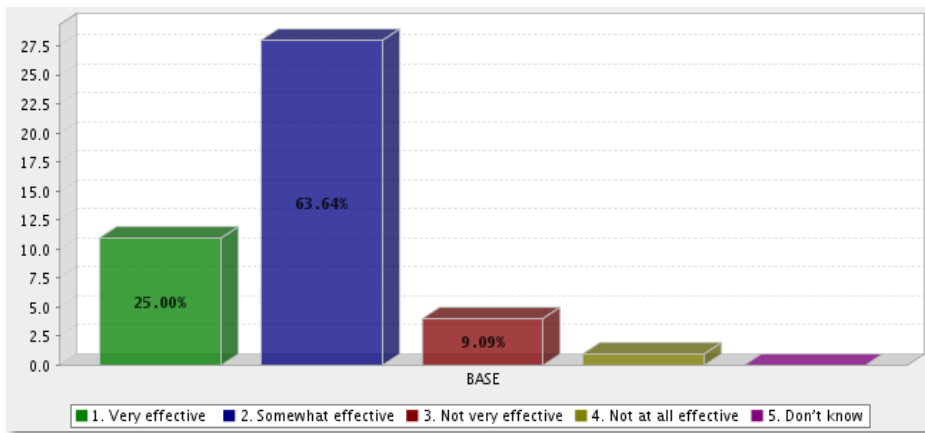**Figure 3.4**     **Our school council influences school priorities for improving student success (School Survey)**

## *Building Strong Relationships*

As a result of the interview conversations, it became clear that all participants strongly believed in the importance of positive relationships between the school council and the principal. This relationship was viewed as essential to school council effectiveness. The development of relational trust between the principal and the school council is understood to require ongoing attention. Participants listed a few indicators of such relational trust between the principal and the chair, including regular informal meetings, co-constructed agendas, and supporting each other in public settings. Frequent meetings between the principal and the chair should be held in order to discuss items that pertain to school council involvement. These meetings can be productive when both the principal and chair share their opinions openly and honestly and come to solution-based decisions that would work for all involved.

Many of those interviewed believed that for a trusting relationship to develop the principal must take the lead and must treat the chair and council members with respect. In turn, participants also believed that it was important that all stakeholders respect the principal's authority and professional judgment. Principal Six supported the importance of a trusting relationship when he stated: "School council is very effective because they are so supportive. They understand how we meet each child's needs. They respect the administration team." In Principal Seven's assessment, the reason that parental involvement increased so dramatically in the first two years of her principalship was the staff's unwavering belief that everyone in the small rural community was welcome in the school and had something that could contribute to learning. Two of the superintendents relayed stories about new principals who quite rapidly improved parental participation in school council affairs through their deliberate and focused attention on community engagement.

From the school council perspective, a number of factors were seen to contribute to the development of positive relationships. Communication was one very important contributor.

Members indicated that they felt acknowledged and appreciated when council suggestions and concerns were heard, considered and responded to in a timely manner. Others had similar expectations for honest, timely, and appropriate communication. A number of other school council participants felt that relational trust was stronger when the principal was friendly, respectful, easy to talk with, and had an open door policy. Parents also indicated that school council effectiveness was greater in situations where principals valued parent input and ideas, understood the mandate of school councils, and placed emphasis on relationship.

Similarly, school council members identified a number of strategies they could use to construct strong positive relationships from their side of the partnership. These included: respectful interactions, abiding by the school council by-laws, and demonstrating appreciation for staff and principal efforts to support student success.

The school survey data represented in Figure 3.6 indicates that 87% of the respondents believed that they were effective at building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders.

**Figure 3.6     Building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders (School Survey)**
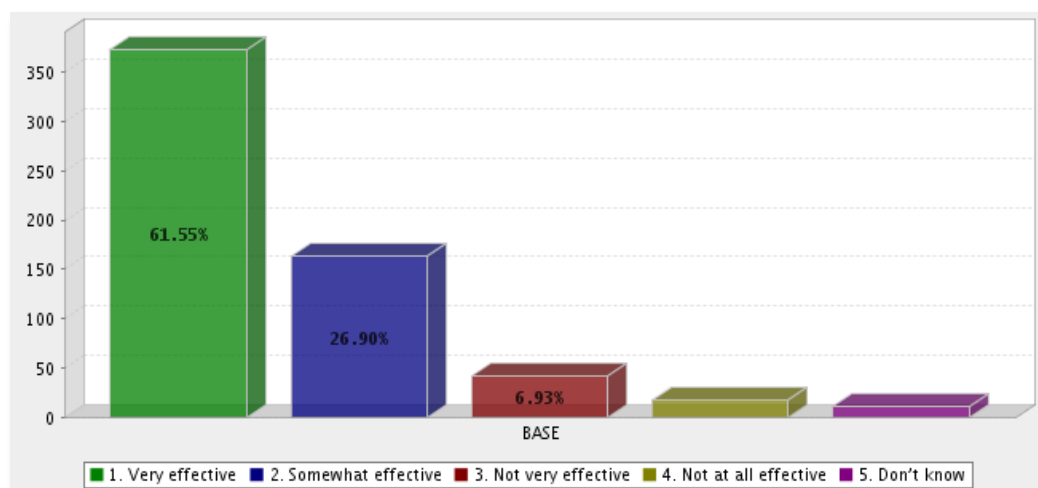


Division leaders echoed what school council members noted about building strong positive relationships. A trusting relationship with the principal and other stakeholders was seen to be extremely important in order for the school council to operate effectively. Figure 3.7 indicates 96% of respondents believe their school councils are effective at building positive relationships with principals and other school and community stakeholders.

Figure 3.7 **Our school councils are effective at building positive relationships with principals and other school and community stakeholders. (School Division Survey)**
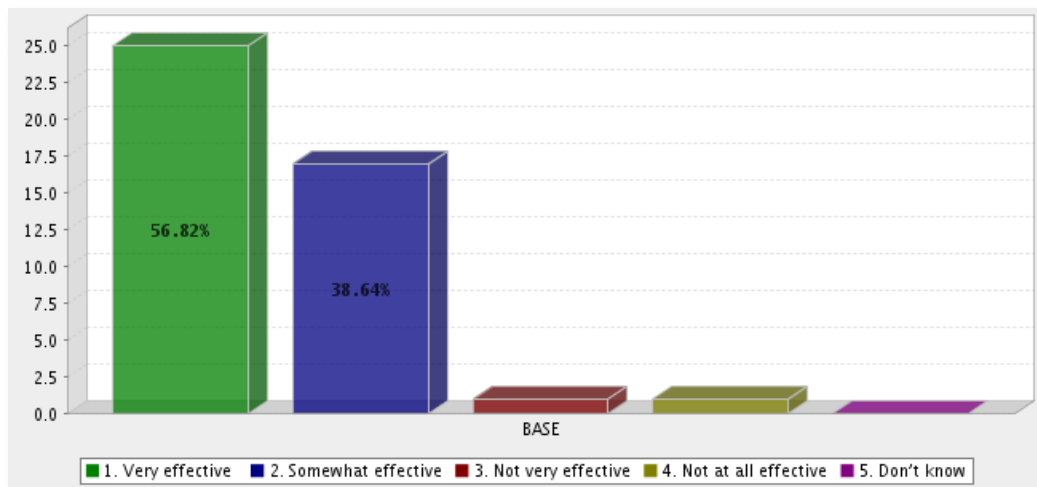


## School Council Effectiveness – Summary and Recommendations

This section of *Inspired Partnerships: School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta* identified and discussed three key findings related to research question one:

> **HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERS, PRINCIPALS, SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL TRUSTEES PERCEIVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCILS?**

These key findings are as follows:

1. Effective school councils are well integrated into the functioning of Alberta schools and school systems. They contribute to positive school cultures, do important work, and are viewed by parents, teachers, principals, superintendents and school trustees as having a significant role in the education system.

2. School council effectiveness hinges on the relational trust developed between the principal and the school council. The principal must work with the school council in an open and honest manner while respecting and encouraging input and advice from the parent community. It is essential that the principal is knowledgeable about the mandate of school councils and assists the members in learning about their roles and responsibilities.

3. When relational trust has been developed, school councils are more likely to contribute meaningfully to school and system efforts to enhance student success.

The three findings on school council effectiveness presented in this section, along with our analysis, and interpretations lead to two following recommendations to support stronger and more widespread school council effectiveness.

It is recommended that:

1. *School systems continue to develop the capacities of school principals to understand and embrace the mandates of school councils in ways that foster relational trust within the school communities.*

2. *School councils focus their efforts on understanding and supporting current educational initiatives designed to help all students to become engaged thinkers, ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit.*

## INSPIRED PARTNERSHIPS
## School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta

## PLANNING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

### Introduction
This fourth section of our report investigates the nature and impact of school council contributions to educational planning at the school and jurisdiction levels. We focus on the study's second research question.

> **IN WHAT WAYS DOES SCHOOL COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND JURISDICTION PLANNING CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS?**

We begin by highlighting selected findings from the large body of research on this topic and then make reference to lessons learned from the four Alberta studies introduced in the preceding section. Analysis and interpretations of our findings are then summarized within the following five categories: school council priorities, member and stakeholder engagement, contributions to school and jurisdiction planning and Council of School Councils. Five recommendations for strengthening the impact of school councils' contributions to planning for student success are then provided.

### School Council Planning – Highlights From Recent Research
Three themes are evident in the large body of research literature that supports the claim that parental involvement in educational planning is an important contributor to student success. First, as noted in the previous section, such involvement can work well when facilitated through relational trust and partnering. Second, the influence of parental and school council networking can heighten impact at the jurisdictional level. Third, the dispositions, knowledge, and skills of school and system leaders in engaging parents through collective leadership approaches can have major benefits for student engagement, learning and well-being.

Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall and Straus (2010) maintain that effective parent engagement accounts for as much as fifty per cent of the variation in student achievement across schools. In a 2004 Canadian Education Association (CEA) study of the impact of parental contributions to school improvement in Ontario, Leithwood and McElhron-Hopkins claim that evidence

> *suggests that when parents assume leadership roles on school councils, in close partnerships with principals, their influence on both the content and processes of school improvement is considerable. What can be concluded from such evidence is that at least passive support for a school's improvement efforts is important, especially from the principal's perspective. (p. 4)*

In the context of this CEA study, parents and school councils were involved in a variety of ways in the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans. At various points parents contributed important information through a variety of means such as surveys, interviews and meetings.

> *They participated in school improvement teams and in school councils as partners with teachers and administrators in creating workable plans. School councils served as vehicles for communication about plans and actions, and for approval of project participation and school improvement plans. (2004, p. 4)*

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010) advise districts to develop policies and clear expectations that support community and parental engagement. They further suggest a system of incentives principals may need to increase the influence of parents and community members within schools.

> *District engagement policies can have long lasting effects on principals. The more principals get used to interacting with the community, the more open they become to involving outside stakeholders in school improvement efforts. The role of the principal in interpreting district engagement policies and in creating and communicating school level expectations for parent engagement is critical. (p. 11)*

School Council Planning – Learning From Four Alberta Studies

Each of the four Alberta school council studies described in the preceding section has offered advice towards increasing the impact of school council contributions to school and system planning.

*School Councils - Next Steps*, which reported results from the 1999 *Minister's Forums on School Councils*, stressed the dual benefits of parental participation in school planning as a means of meaningful involvement and to increase the accountability of schools for educational outcomes. At this early stage in the evolution of school councils "it became apparent many members of school councils were unaware of all the areas in which they could be involved if they so chose" (p. 15). Just 44% of respondents believed they fully understood their roles and responsibilities. The report claimed that school councils that flagged having a three-year plan as one of their "best practices" tended to be more effective.

Alberta Education's extensive 2004 follow up consultation process, *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation* found that school council participation in planning was becoming more common and less contentious. Participants in consultations suggested that effective school councils "provide input to principal and board on important matters, e.g. school and jurisdiction plans, budgets, programs, policies, facility use, results" and do so in ways which "respect the roles and responsibilities of and cooperate with others (e.g. teachers, principals, jurisdiction administrators, other parent organizations)" (p. 15).

The report promoted participation in planning as the "primary focus of the council is the advisory role in education matters/enhancing learning" with the focus on "advising administration and the board in making the best educational decisions for the children in the school" (p. 18). "While some council members did not feel that setting short and/or long term goals was a priority for them, those that did felt it was the crux to meaningful involvement in supporting their school" (p. 18). The challenge of representing the entire school community was noted:

> *Recognizing that only a small number of people are willing to make a commitment to regular participation in the advisory role of council, the council should actively seek out the voice of the larger school community in the identification of council priorities and in responding to important issues. Consultation with other parents is essential. (p. 18)*

An evolution in school council participation in educational planning was evident four years later. In *A Survey of Alberta School Councils: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges,* Raham and Bennett (2008) found evidence of relevant knowledge and skill development for participants in the School Council Development (SCD) workshops led by the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA). They recommended "training and acculturation for school council members across the province should be continued and expanded" (p. 71) in the following manner:

> *A priority should be placed on training with respect to school council involvement in educational planning processes. The current training module could be redesigned to build understandings of the council's role and, in particular, the capacity to contribute at the formative stages of the school's Three Year Education Plan. (p. 71)*

To optimize opportunities for improved school council contributions to planning school and system leaders must "identify and remove barriers to school council participation in this process and provide the necessary supports to strengthen their influence" (p. 71).

Alberta Education's 2013 *Parent Involvement in Child's Education and School Council* report indicates that parents' perspectives on the impact of school council participation in educational

planning has remained strong over the past five years: "A high proportion of parents who indicated they were familiar with the school council reported that school council influences decisions made at their child's school (79%)" (p. 3). A high proportion (83%) of parents, school board trustees (81%), teachers (80%) and principals (80%) reported that school council is fulfilling its advisory role (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 8).

Satisfaction with parental input at the jurisdiction and provincial levels is considerably less. About six in ten parents (60%) reported satisfaction with the degree to which parental input into the education of students is considered by their school board. Similarly, half of parents (50%) were satisfied with the degree to which Alberta Education considered their input into the education of students (p. 6).

### School Council Planning – Findings, Analysis and Interpretations

Four key findings stemming from our investigation into the nature and impact of school council contributions to educational planning at the school and jurisdiction levels are presented, analyzed and interpreted in this sub-section. We focus on the study's second research question:

> **IN WHAT WAYS DOES SCHOOL COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND JURISDICTION PLANNING CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS?**

The summary to this section outlines five recommendations derived from the following presentation and discussion of findings. Finding One is that school councils set their priorities based on informal analyses of how best to help school efforts to support student learning. Finding Two is that school councils are engaged in a variety of meaningful activities that support student learning in their schools and school divisions. Finding Three is that school councils contribute to school planning in three general ways: they discuss completed plans; they provide feedback and recommendations on draft plans or they begin by collaboratively reviewing student learning data and providing input on the planning process. Finding Four is that councils of school councils are viewed as important mechanisms for system-level planning.

### *School Council Priorities*

The data we collected from a variety of sources suggests that school councils generally set their priorities based on their informal analyses of how best to support school plans for achieving student success. Most school councils do not use a formal process for establishing priorities and developing plans to achieve them. However, the work of school councils was aligned with their school's improvement plan in every school that participated in our case study. One school council chair described her council's informal planning process as follows: "We align our priorities with the school plan. We get on committees and do what we need to do" (School Council Member Two). Another school council chair shared that, "the school council would meet with the principal in early September, ask about the school priorities and ask how can

school council help" (School Council Member Ten). Similar comments were made in other school council interviews.

Data retrieved from the survey and displayed on Figure 4.1 support our case study interview data: only 10% of the respondents reported their school council establishes its own three-year plan, while 70% indicate that there is no plan and 20% do not know if there is a plan.

**Figure 4.1      Has your school council established its own three-year plan? (School Survey)**
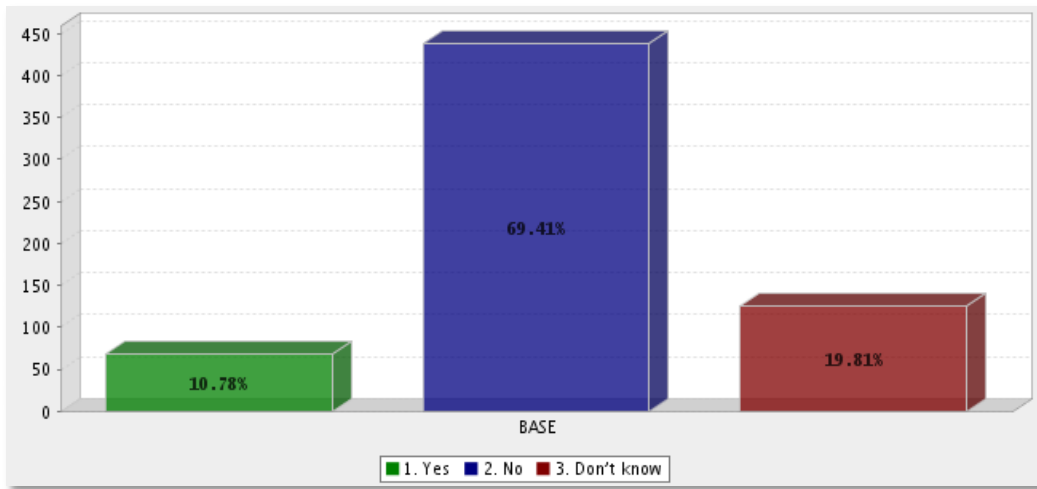


Even without formal processes or plans all interviewees were able to speak to the priorities of their school councils. The priority most often mentioned was supporting school programs to ensure that all students receive a quality education in a safe and caring environment. This often involved supporting teachers in a variety of ways that allowed teachers to retain their focus on teaching and learning.  Principal Six described his school council's support in the following way: "They are looking for ways to support the staff so the teachers can focus on their jobs. What can the school council take off the teacher's plate?" One example of this type of support is fundraising through arms length education societies to enable more curricular field trips or to purchase supplementary materials to enhance the programs. A second example is hosting information evenings to bring awareness to parents on topics such as assessment, resiliency, drug awareness and cyber bullying.

Another common priority among school councils was to recruit volunteers to carry out the many activities that the school council performed throughout the year to assist the principal in meeting school priorities.  Even though attendance at school council meetings was often described as low, all school councils interviewed shared that parents were always willing to volunteer and help out when called upon.

School councils often used their monthly meetings to engage participants in meaningful, transparent dialogue about teaching and learning of priority interest to them. Agenda topics such as assessment, literacy, and school programming provided opportunities for members to be informed and to engage in important discussion. These school councils focused on being solution-oriented problem solving organizations that would advise the principal rather than on complaining.

Providing input on the division Three Year Education Plan and their school's Improvement Plan was an expectation of all of the case study school councils. These school councils fully understood their roles as advisory to the principal and to the school system. School council members indicated that their work throughout the year was primarily designed to support the implementation of the school plan. Figure 4.2 displays online survey respondent views on the ways their school councils support the implementation of priorities and goals set out in the school's Three-Year Education Plan. The three most frequently used strategies were providing information to parents (24%), suggesting council activities to support the goals in the Plan (21%), and funding of specific initiatives (21%). Interview findings yielded similar results.

**Figure 4.2**    **In what ways has your school council supported the implementation of priorities and goals set out in the school's Three-Year Education Plan? (School Survey)**
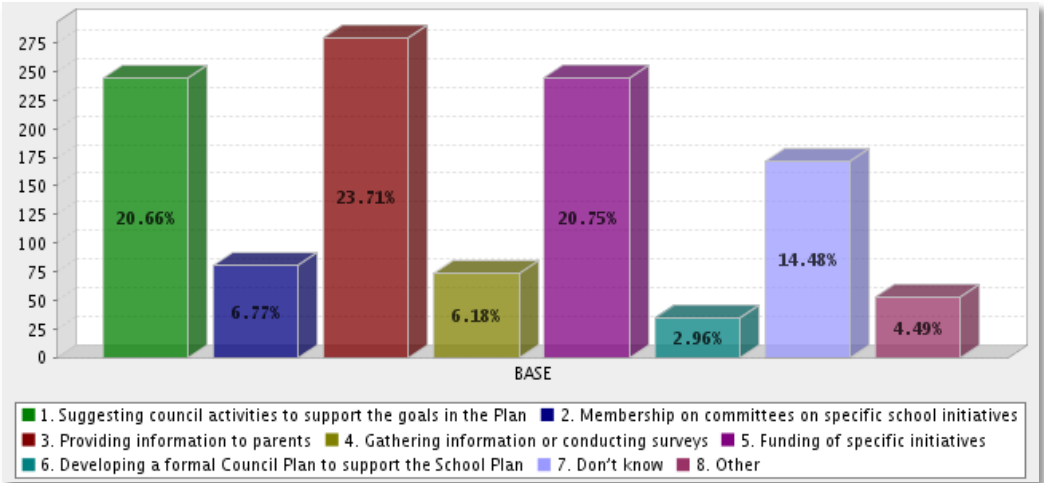


Most school councils in the case studies saw themselves as informed advocates for the school in the community. By knowing what was happening in the school they were able to bring an informed awareness to community members who may be speaking out against initiatives that were taking place in the school. The value in informing school council members was expressed by a school principal: "School council is our best advocate. If they understand and can articulate what we do, they can spread confidence in their school to the public" (Principal Five). In turn

these school councils believed they could be the eyes and ears in the community for the principal and keep him or her informed of the pulse of the broader community.

Online survey data, Figure 4.3, shows the majority of school council time is spent on fundraising (28%), providing advice to the school principal (22%) and consulting/reporting to the parents and community (19%). An assumption can be made that the school council believes these are their priorities since they spend the majority of their time involved in these activities.

**Figure 4.3**      **What percentage of school council time was spent on each of the following activities during the past year? (School Survey)**
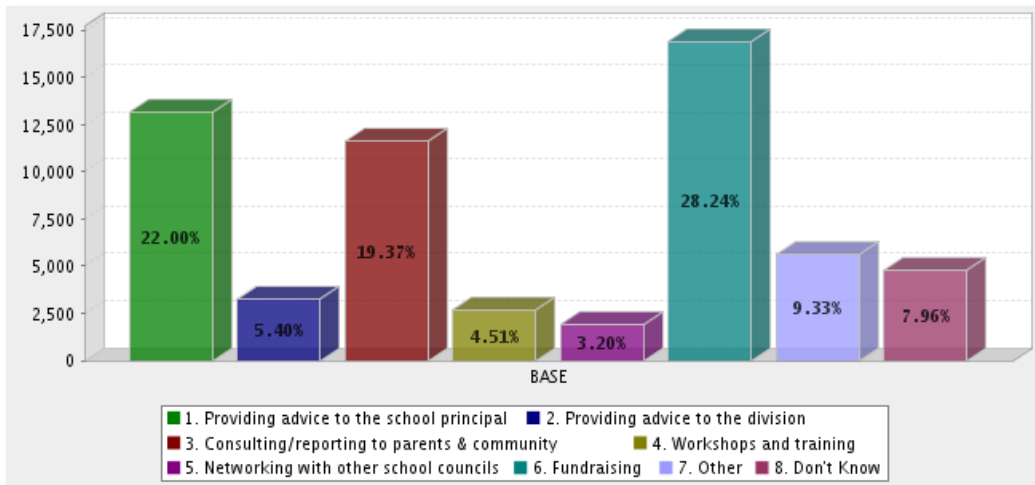


The trustees and superintendents we interviewed shared what they believe to be the more important priorities for school councils. First on this list is the idea of supporting the school community of students, parents and staff. This priority can be accomplished through communication, planning, and carrying out specific activities that support aspects of the school's Three Year Education Plan. Another important priority according to this group of interviewees is the ability of the school council to work with the principal, superintendent and school board in navigating unique community issues such as sustaining small schools, providing adequate programming for small rural high schools, and fostering a wider understanding of teaching and learning approaches such as assessment. Through meetings, public consultations and information sessions, councils are able to help inform the school community while providing forums for community members to provide suggestions and feedback. Such approaches assist school councils in their understanding and contribute to community-based solutions to issues. Such processes can help bridge gaps between parents and administration by developing more complete pictures of issues and by allowing the voices of all involved to be heard and considered when making decisions.

## *Engaging School Council Members and Other Stakeholders*

There are a variety of methods of engaging school council members in meaningful and fulfilling approaches to supporting student success. School councils and educators are increasingly working as partners in this regard. Each of the case study interviews conveyed the message that strong communication was a critical factor affecting member and stakeholder engagement. Respondents consistently stressed the importance of informing and hearing from both parents and the broader community.

**Figure 4.4**   Our school council uses formal communication tools to keep all members informed. (School Survey)
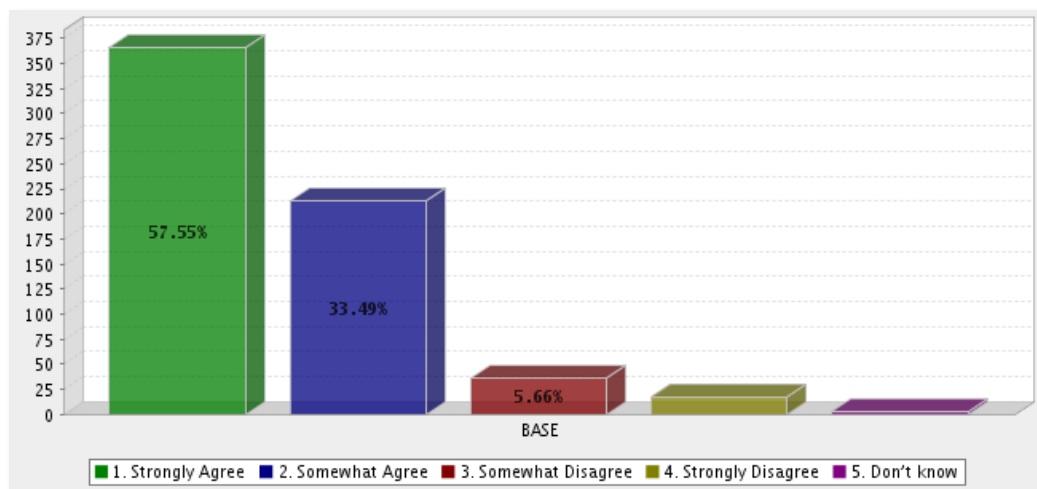


Online school survey results in Figure 4.4 show that 80% of respondents agree that their school council uses formal communication tools to keep all members informed. Methods of communication employed included posting minutes of school council meetings in the school's electronic newsletter and on the school website, advertising school council events on the sign outside the school and (particularly in rural areas) leaving hard copies of minutes and advertisements of events with grocery stores, other businesses and in waiting rooms of doctors, dentists and other professionals. A few of the participants interviewed shared that their school council also utilized Twitter, email and Facebook to communicate and engage members and stakeholders.

Figure 4.5 reports meetings (30%) as the tool most often used by school council for communication followed by newsletters (24%) and websites (17%).
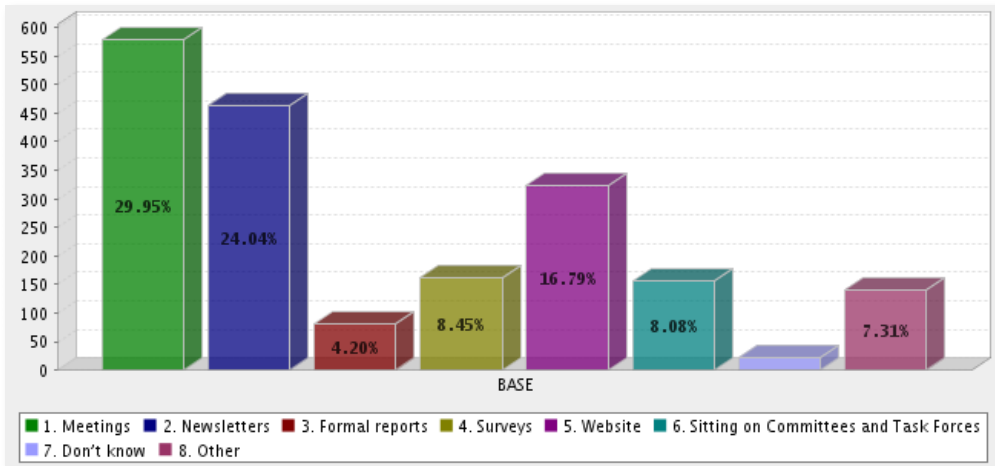
Participating school council representatives and principals indicated that school council meetings were the most common form of communication to the parents. All participants interviewed expressed that inadequate attendance at meetings hindered the communication process. Those in attendance were able to obtain the information first hand while the minutes provided the information to those who were not in attendance. The effectiveness of the meetings was also described as an important factor in determining meeting participation. More people are likely to attend meetings that are chaired effectively, include agenda items of interest, stay focused on the agenda and are finished in a reasonable amount of time. One school council chair stated, "We have good attendance at our meetings. Each grade has a parent representative; there are always three teachers in attendance, one student representative, one community member and the school council executive" (School Council Member Nine).

Many interviewees suggested that time pressure for parents was generally the reason for poor attendance at school council meetings, but whenever volunteers were needed there was always adequate support to carry out the activity. Online survey results shown in Figure 4.6 report 89% of the respondents believe their school council seeks advice from the school community.

Some participants talked about their school councils creating a welcoming atmosphere. It was important that school council members were friendly with other parents and community members and they would reach out to invite their input and participation. As School Council Member 13 noted, "it can be a bit intimidating when you are new. It was great to be made to feel so welcome by the principal and others on the council."
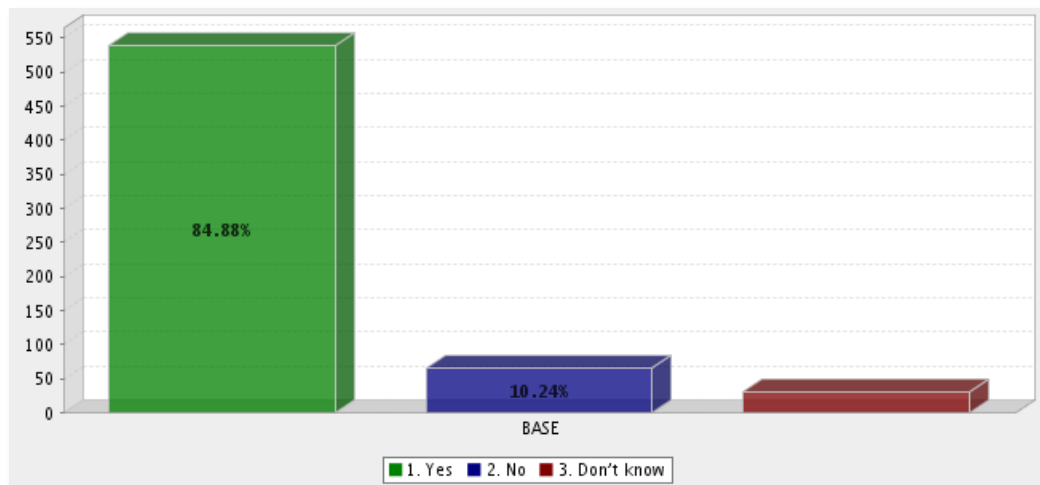
Social events that involved parents and their children were the most successful ways to engage members and stakeholders. Examples of these events were BBQs, food bank drives, meet the teacher evenings, coffee and muffin mornings, bottle drives, hot lunch programs, and book fairs. Events like these provided purposeful and enjoyable social interactions that helped to build positive school culture.

While engagement with the school takes many forms, participating in school planning was one of the most frequently mentioned approaches. Several interviewees felt that their questions, advice and affirmations helped to ensure that their school's efforts were more sharply focused on improving student success within a safe and caring environment.  As one school council chair commented, "In school planning in particular we are able to identify specific demographic needs to be addressed" (School Council Member Nine).

This group of interviewees felt that school councils were better able to contribute to the learning environment rather than more directly influencing teaching practice. This assumption is supported in the data from the school interviews that show the priority most often mentioned by school councils was supporting school programs to ensure students receive a quality education in a safe and caring environment while supporting teachers in a variety of ways so they can focus on teaching and learning.

A few of the case study council members who were interviewed shared that they thought their school councils could be more strategic if they took the time to develop their own three year plan that was aligned with the school plan.

Seeking advice from various stakeholder groups was a means of engaging stakeholders. Those school councils who were members of a council of school councils shared that they were provided with an opportunity to share and learn from other school councils.  School councils who had a trustee attend each of their monthly meetings shared that this gave them an opportunity to learn what was happening at the division level and also have their voice heard through the trustee at the board level.

Participants at the system level observed school councils engaging members and stakeholders by communicating through a variety of electronic means such as: school and school council websites, electronic newsletters and email contacts with parents. They also viewed engagement in face-to-face opportunities which included being present at parent teacher interviews, hosting social events which brought parents, students and teachers together, and informal conversations in a variety of school and community settings. This interview data correlates with the information gathered from the school council interviews and online survey results.

### *Contributions to School Planning*

School councils significantly contribute to school planning in one of three general ways. They discuss completed plans; they provide feedback and recommendations on draft plans; or they collaboratively review student achievement data and provide input near the beginning of the planning process.

In all the school council interviews the principal was the one to initiate school council involvement into the planning process. The process for school council involvement in school improvement planning was similar in all school councils interviewed. The principal presented relevant evidence about the school and its performance by sharing data from the Accountability Pillar Results, Satisfaction Survey Results, Provincial Achievement Tests and/or the Diploma Exams. Once the evidence was examined the principal presented the draft school improvement plan for feedback and input. In most cases the school council involvement included questions, advice and affirmation that the plan provided for improved student success in a safe and caring environment.  One school council chair commented, "Mostly we trust the principal and staff and know they are doing the best for our students" (School Council Member Three). "We trust and respect the principal's professional judgment and authority in the school" was how School Council Member Four expressed their belief in the adequacy of the school improvement plan.

Online survey results as shown in Figure 4.7 indicate that 62% of the respondents believe that their school council gives advice on the School's Three Year Education Plan and Annual Education Results Report.

Figure 4.7 Does your school council provide advice on the School's Three-Year Education Plan and Annual Education Results Report? (School Survey)
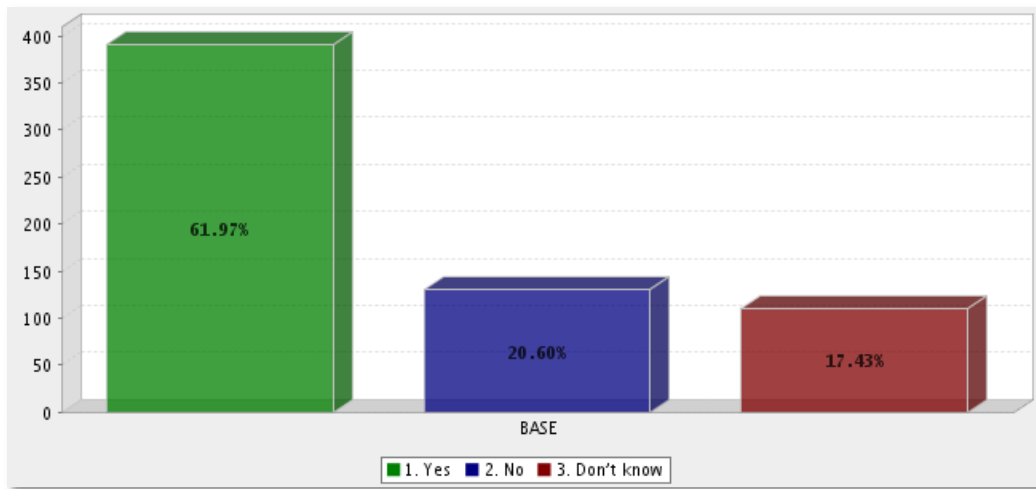


Online survey results in Figure 4.8 describe the various ways school councils are involved in developing or revising a School's Three Year Education Plan (Improvement Plan). At a lower level of involvement, 21% heard an explanation and had a discussion of the completed plan. At a slightly higher level, 17% provided feedback and recommendations on a draft plan. At the highest level of participation, 20% reviewed student achievement data with the principal as part of the planning process.

Figure 4.8     In what ways was your school council involved in developing or revising the School's Three-Year Education Plan during the past year? (School Survey)
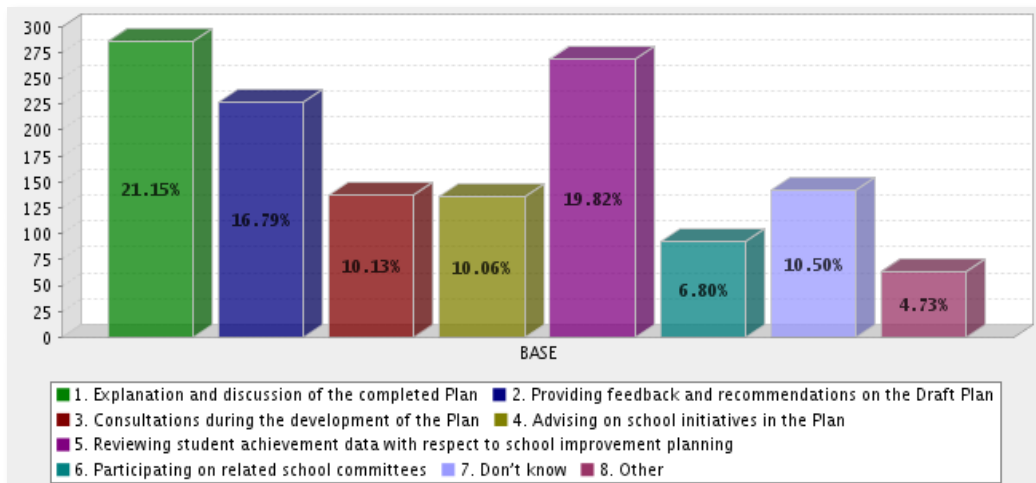
Interviewees expressed that the principal would seek advice from school council when certain issues arose or intiatives were being considered both at the school and division level. Information was shared to keep the school council informed, discussion was held and advice was provided. Some examples of this were given: High School Flexibility Project, grade configurations, transitioning of grade 9 students to grade 10, welcoming students from schools that have been closed, program offerings particularly at the high school.

## *Contributions to Division Planning*

Participating school representatives and principals indicate that all school council chairs contribute to division planning on a regular basis. All those interviewed shared that school council chairs were invited to participate in division planning processes such as developing a new vision and mission for the school division and providing feedback into the Three Year Education Plan and the budget. One council member declared that being involved with the planning of the Division's Three Year Education Plan assisted them in aligning the School Improvement Plan to the Division's Plan. One respondent mentioned that the Chairs have opportunities to speak with the superintendent and ask pertinent questions around issues such as assessment and quality education for students.

As noted in other parts of the report, the interview data indicated that the school councils are meaningfully involved in system improvement processes while the survey data represented in Figure 4.9 shows only 58% of the respondents believe this to be true.

Figure 4.9    Does our school council have a meaningful role in school district improvement processes? (School Survey)
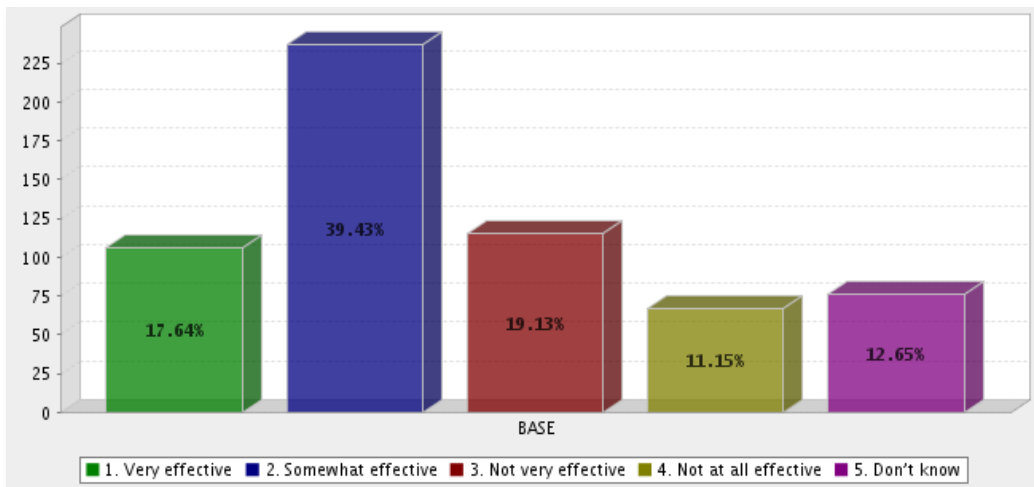
The interviewed respondents from school divisions that had established councils of school councils felt that this created a vehicle for meaningful input in the Three Year Education Plan. It was also a mechanism for informing councils about proposed initiatives that the division was considering and looking for advice on before proceeding. Council chairs were then able to take back information from these meetings and share with their school councils.

Participants described the school council contribution to division and school planning as important. A superintendent expressed the opportunity for the council chair to be involved in division planning sessions as, "two way communication; we learn from them and they learn from us. Then they take the information back and share it with their own councils and consider the information in their context" (Superintendent Two). Involvement in division planning is an opportunity for the school council voice to be heard and considered. Participating trustees and superintendents believe that school council input and feedback strengthens and anchors educational planning by including parent voice.

Online survey results shown in Figure 4.10 support the views expressed about the meaningful involvement of school councils. Eighty-two percent of respondents believed that school councils are meaningfully involved in system improvement processes.

**Figure 4.10     Are school councils meaningfully involved in system improvement processes? (School Survey)**
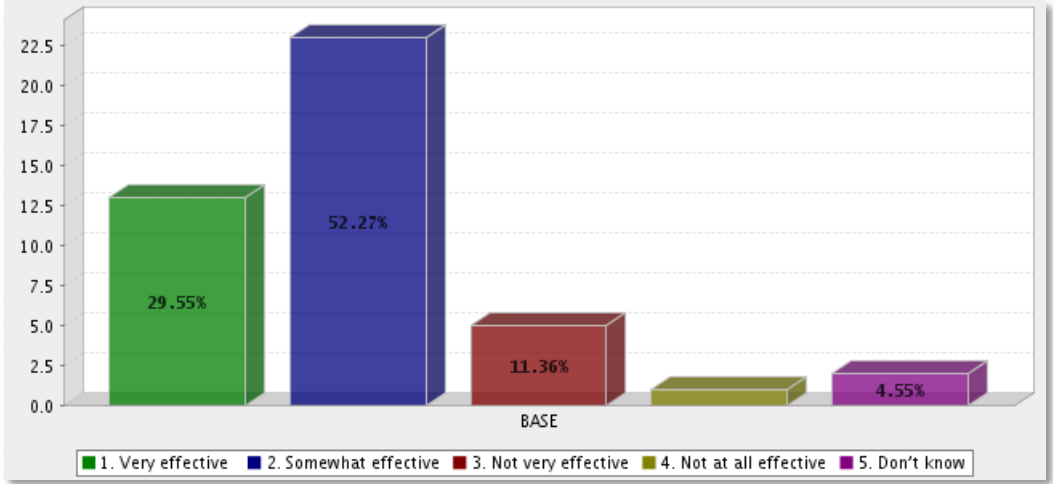


## Councils of School Councils

Participating trustees and superintendents indicate that councils of school councils are highly valued and contribute to school, school system and school council effectiveness. They are viewed as important vehicles to support system-level planning and provide invaluable aid to

districts that are navigating change. In this respect, these school council networks provide forums for ongoing community dialogue on important and emerging educational initiatives and issues.

The way councils of school councils work varies from system to system. In many cases it involves the bringing together of school council chairs and one other council member, a school board committee, senior system leaders and school principals two or more times during the year to discuss issues and provide input from each participant's perspectives. Chairs share their council's vision and beliefs, which provides senior system leaders and trustees the opportunity to gain an understanding of the uniqueness and goals of each council. School council voice is heard on issues and is considered in the decision making process. In turn the chairs learn about the larger issues at the division level and their impact on the schools. Chairs are able to share this view with their councils and allow for a deeper understanding of the complexity of issues faced by the board. Council of school council is also a venue for chairs to network with each other while sharing concerns, issues and initiatives.

One of the school systems we visited had developed an elaborate and effective variation on the idea of council of school councils. This system facilitates trustee meetings with parents for three purposes:

1. *Educate – give parents opportunities to learn about the many district initiatives which include budget process, local and provincial initiatives, new and existing programming, effective pedagogy and provided opportunities for parents to take part in sessions with guest presenters on topics of current and identified relevancy.*

2. *Connect – build relationships with school council chairs and school council members.*

3. *Communication – improve the flow of information between school council chairs and Board of Trustees so that the Board is able to attend the specific needs of each Ward. (Document A provided by Superintendent Four)*

The schedule for the 2012-2013 school year included a new school council chair orientation, a school council chair and trustee general meeting and four parent and trustee forums. The design of each parent forum aimed to use the time available for structured interaction through table conversations. In Trustee Four's view, the forum structure and process reflected the evolution of district's efforts to strengthening community engagement. "We need to hear what the issues are, so that we can work with administration to find solutions and move forward. The forums are highly interactive. They provide us with a lot of good information and help to build awareness of what we are doing to better support our students" (Trustee Four).

Superintendent Four and Principal 16 both spoke about the problem solving power of the parent and trustee forums. From the central office perspective, the forums give administration

and trustees ongoing opportunities to enter into educational dialogue with parents in all parts of the system. From the school council perspective, the sessions provide opportunities to learn about and to influence system directions. The fact that agendas are developed with parent input and are circulated in advance conveys respect and helps to utilize time effectively. The fact that written question responses and meeting summaries are posted on the website reflect efforts to be accountable, open and transparent. Such actions build public confidence in the system.

## School Council Planning – Summary and Recommendations

This section of *Inspired Partnerships: School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta* identified and discussed four key findings related to research question two:

> IN WHAT WAYS DOES SCHOOL COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND JURISDICTION PLANNING CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS?

These four key findings are as follows:

1. School councils generally set their priorities based on their informal analyses of how best to support school plans for achieving success for all students.

2. There are a variety of methods of engaging school council members in meaningful and fulfilling approaches to supporting student success. School councils and educators are increasingly working as partners in this regard.

3. School councils significantly contribute to school planning in one of three general ways. They discuss completed plans; they provide feedback and recommendations on draft plans; or they collaboratively review student achievement data and provide input near the beginning of the planning process.

4. Councils of school councils are viewed as important mechanisms for system-level planning, navigating change and ongoing community dialogue on important and emerging educational initiatives and issues. These networks can provide an important two-way communication conduit between school communities and their school boards.

The four findings on school council planning presented in this section, along with our analysis and interpretations, lead to five recommendations to support even stronger school council contributions to student success through enhanced school and system planning.

It is recommended that:

1. *Parents continue to engage with their schools through attendance at regular school council meetings. Further to this recommendation, school council chairs need to ensure that meetings are purposeful, effective, and have a focused topic of interest.*

2. *School systems develop policies and implementation plans to foster parental engagement at the school and system levels.*

3. *School councils develop their own Three Year Plans that align with school and system plans.*

4. *School councils seek out and represent the voice of the larger school community.*

5. *School divisions purposely build the capacity of their councils of school councils to authentically contribute to system problem solving, planning and direction setting.*

# INSPIRED PARTNERSHIPS
## School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta

## SCHOOL COUNCIL LEARNING, NETWORKING, AND RESOURCES

### Introduction

Previous studies of Alberta school councils have called for more training (learning), networking and resources. Provincial efforts to heed these calls have been notable and ongoing since the first provincial study was published in 1999. Each of these three factors – learning, networking and resources – was addressed by a specific recommendation in *School Councils – Next Steps: Minister's Forums on School Councils Final Report*:

> *That Alberta Learning, in partnership with school boards as well as other stakeholders, ensure there is sufficient opportunity for school council members to receive training. School council member training should include, but not be limited to:*
>
> o *understanding the roles and responsibilities of school council members*
> o *setting goals for the school council*
> o *developing and monitoring a business plan for the school council*
> o *developing school council bylaws.*
>
> *That Alberta Learning ensures comprehensive information materials related to the mandate and activities of school councils are readily available.*
>
> *That school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Councils within their districts.*
>
> *Evaluations from many of the attendees at the public forums indicated they valued the opportunities to meet with members of other school councils. This interaction allowed them to discuss common concerns and share solutions to common problems. (pp. 14-15)*

To follow up on these recommendations and similar findings from 2004's *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultations*, Alberta Education provided grant funding that allowed the Alberta School Councils' Association to partner with the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA), the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta (ASBOA) and the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA).  Training and development materials created through this collaboration insured all stakeholder perspectives about school councils were considered prior to the launch of a four year pilot program:  The School Council Development (SCD) Project.

The program was so successful that it has since been incorporated into ASCA's ongoing mandate. ASCA continues to support the effectiveness of school councils through the provision of training and materials, advice and advocacy.

Research substantiating the importance of learning and networking begins this fifth section, followed by lessons learned from three of the four previous Alberta school council studies. We then display our four key findings and interpretations before outlining three recommendations related to our third research question:

### WHAT IMPACTS ARE SCHOOL COUNCIL LEARNING, NETWORKING, AND RESOURCES HAVING ON SCHOOL COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS?

#### School Council Learning, Networking, and Resources – Highlights From Recent Research

Though the research on school council learning and networking is not extensive, some elements from the literature on adult and professional learning are instructive. One applicable idea is the notion of learning partnerships. In keeping with the partnering orientation to parental engagement discussed in the earlier section on school council effectiveness, there is merit in considering the learning needs of both educators and parents. A second idea is that parent learning and networking can take many forms. No single approach is paramount. The importance of providing quality adult learning is a third consideration.

Robinson's (2011) notion of engaging parents through partnerships underlines the value of developing adult learning programs for both teachers and parents. She contends that schools need to employ a wide range of strategies to engage parents. Important design characteristics for such learning include:

- *making student learning the primary focus of the program,*
- *providing parents with explicit information and training (for example, modeling and reinforcing appropriate strategies for tutoring in reading),*
- *supplying materials for use at home,*
- *helping families access resources such as books,*
- *aligning school-home practices so that parents' expectations for their children's achievement are raised, and*
- *using data on parent reactions and student progress to progressively improve the program.  (p. 141)*

According to Robinson's research, teachers also need appropriate support and professional development to effectively engage parents. The focus should be on increasing teachers' knowledge of the school's communities, their confidence in communicating with parents from

diverse backgrounds and ways of utilizing community resources for learning (p. 141). Perhaps most important is that school leaders have the knowledge and skills required to build trust to fashion stronger community-school relationships. Such school conditions make it easier for parents and teachers to work together to improve students' engagement and achievement (p. 136). The district's important role in building school leader community engagement capacities is stressed by Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010, p. 11).

Leithwood and Jantzi's (2006) synthesis of 40 studies points to the importance of several parental factors on children's academic success. These include family work habits, stimulation to think about and discuss issues, provision of adequate health and nutritional conditions, and physical settings in the home conducive to academic work. Perhaps most important are the academic and occupational aspirations that parents have for their children. As one of the superintendent's in our study observed, "parents consistently tell us that they want to learn more about how to become more effective parents" (Superintendent Four).

Alberta researchers Townsend and Adams (2009) champion the concept of *unitas* "in which characteristics of effective adult education, professional development, and community intersect in a process of inquiry. Many conditions, strategies, activities, and phases of professional development are associated with adult learning and with the ideals of a community of learners" (p. 87).

Timperely's (2011) analysis of the best evidence on adult learning suggests that there are many approaches that can be effective.

> *No activity or process, whether facilitated by others (e.g. coaching, modeling and engaging with professional readings) or self-directed (e.g. discussing mutually identified problems, reflection and inquiry) was consistently associated with improved student success. What was important? The knowledge and skills learned as a result of engagement with the activity or process. (p. 6)*

School Council Learning, Networking, and Resources – Learning From Four Alberta Studies
Three of the four Alberta school council studies described in preceding sections provide insights into the learning, networking and resource needs of school councils in Alberta. As noted in the introduction to this section, the first provincial inquiry into school councils made several recommendations in response to the finding that only 44% of respondents believed they fully understood their roles and responsibilities as school council members. *School Councils - Next Steps*, which reported results from the 1999 *Minister's Forums on School Councils*, called

upon Alberta Learning to take steps to develop a comprehensive training program to ensure that all stakeholders understood the mandate and benefits of school councils.

> *In some instances, participants indicated they knew materials, such as the Resources Guide, had been available at their schools but they were no longer able to locate them. A number of participants indicated the materials available to them did not provide all the information they required to be productive school council members. It is suggested that, on an ongoing basis, Alberta Learning encourage school councils to identify practices which have proved useful in increasing their effectiveness. These best practices should then be distributed to councils along with other information materials. (p. 14)*

By 2004, *Alberta School Council Effectiveness: Summary and Findings of the Provincial Consultation* found that school council members had clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities and were more effective at setting goals and supporting school planning. Participation in planning was becoming more common and less contentious. Further, the report pointed to the importance of relationships in school council learning.

In *A Survey of Alberta School Councils: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges,* Raham and Bennett (2008) found evidence of relevant knowledge and skill development for participants in the School Council Development workshops led by the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA). They recommended that "training and acculturation for school council members across the province should be continued and expanded" (p. 71) in the following manner:

> *A priority should be placed on training with respect to school council involvement in educational planning processes. The current training module could be redesigned to build understandings of the council's role and, in particular, the capacity to contribute at the formative stages of the school's Three Year Education Plan. (p. 71)*

Their findings presented conflicting views on the question of whether school councils had sufficient training opportunities to develop the necessary skills to do their work. The large majority of superintendents, board chairs and, to a somewhat lesser degree, principals believed this was so, while many council members (45%) and chairs (32%) disagreed. On the other hand, Raham and Bennett provided evidence that knowledge and skills were being transferred to participants in the School Council Development workshops and that the training modules were relevant to the field.

School Council Learning, Networking, and Resources – Findings, Analysis and Interpretations

Four general findings are presented and discussed in this section, which focuses on school council learning, networking, and resources in relation to the study's third research question:

WHAT IMPACTS ARE SCHOOL COUNCIL LEARNING, NETWORKING, AND RESOURCES HAVING ON SCHOOL COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS?

The four findings are based on themes emerging from data we collected through three separate online surveys as well as from 32 interviews conducted in the four representative school systems. The findings, analysis and interpretations are presented in four sub-sections. The first focuses on the importance of high quality adult learning. The second looks at the multiple pathways that lead to school council learning. Sub-section three addresses the value of partnering. We close the section with attention to the adequacy of school council resources.

## High Quality Adult Learning

Data collected from all sources underlined the finding that Alberta school council members have a variety of opportunities to access high quality learning. While the broader spectrum of learning approaches is explored in greater detail in the following sub-section, we focus here on the general quality of more formalized learning sessions that have been provided through the ASCA and other providers.

Figures 5.1 through 5.11 provide consistent evidence that those who actually take part in ASCA learning sessions really appreciate them. Of the 79 individuals who responded to the specific online survey for past participants in ASCA learning sessions, 89% were involved in face to face sessions, approximately 7% engaged in webinars, and the remaining 4% experienced learning through videoconferencing technology. As the figures in this section illustrate, the level of satisfaction is high.

Data from the 636 school council members who completed the larger online survey point to the need for ASCA to continue and, perhaps, heighten its efforts to reach an even larger audience. Nearly 20% of the respondents to this survey were not aware that ASCA provides training workshops for school councils and just 22% of these individuals participated in one or more learning sessions. 57% of these sessions were provided by ASCA.

**Figure 5.1    The ASCA workshop(s) were well organized. (Learning Session Survey)**



Bar chart showing 65.38% for 1. Strongly Agree and 32.05% for 2. Somewhat Agree.
Legend: ■ 1. Strongly Agree  ■ 2. Somewhat Agree  ■ 3. Somewhat Disagree  ■ 4. Strongly Disagree  ■ 5. Don't know/Not applicable
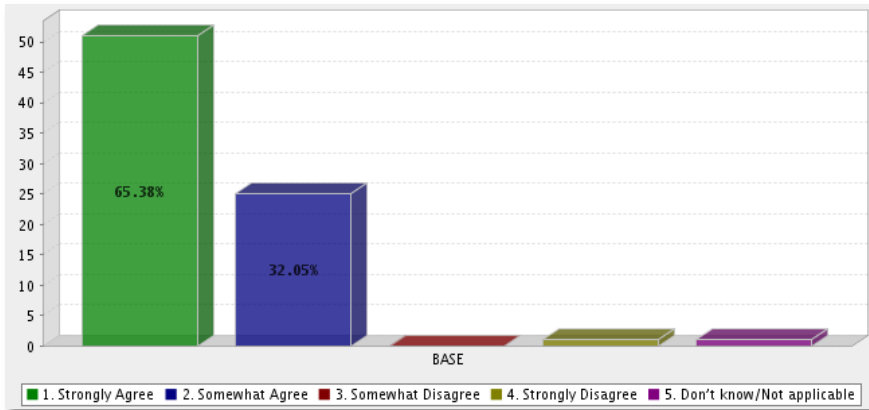
**Figure 5.2    The ASCA workshop(s) were led by an effective presenter/facilitator. (Learning Session Survey)**



Bar chart showing 65.38% for 1. Strongly Agree and 30.77% for 2. Somewhat Agree.
Legend: ■ 1. Strongly Agree  ■ 2. Somewhat Agree  ■ 3. Somewhat Disagree  ■ 4. Strongly Disagree  ■ 5. Don't know/Not applicable
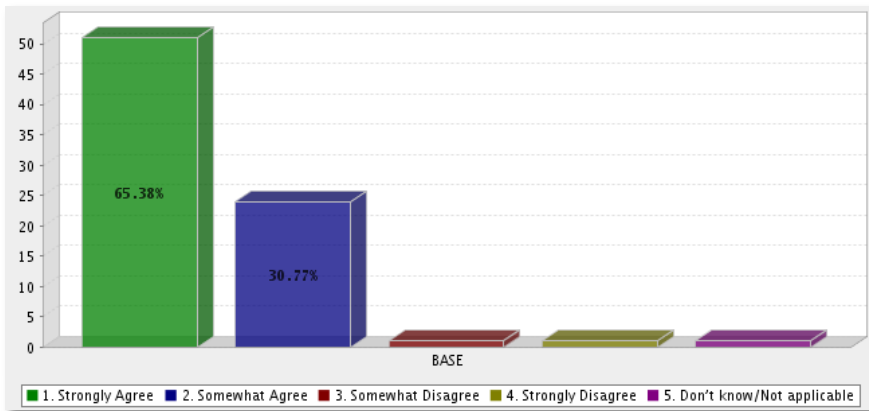
**Figure 5.3    The ASCA workshop(s) were a good use of my time. (Learning Session Survey)**



Bar chart showing 67.53% for 1. Strongly Agree and 27.27% for 2. Somewhat Agree.
Legend: ■ 1. Strongly Agree  ■ 2. Somewhat Agree  ■ 3. Somewhat Disagree  ■ 4. Strongly Disagree  ■ 5. Don't know/Not applicable
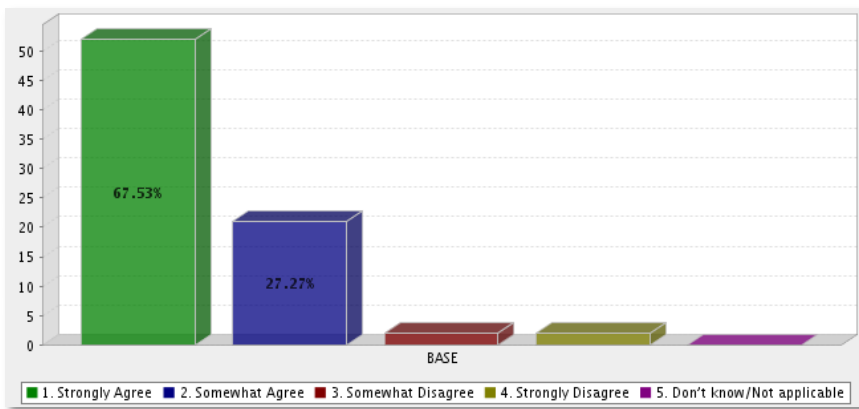
**Figure 5.4    The ASCA workshop(s) were enjoyable. (Learning Session Survey)**
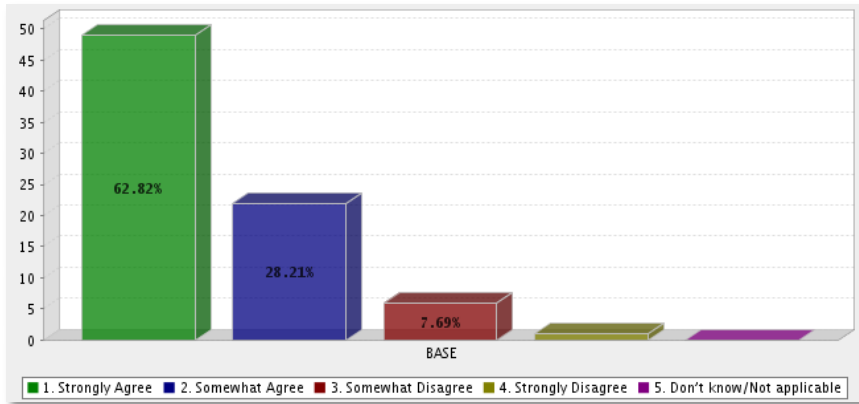


**Figure 5.5    The ASCA workshop(s) provided opportunities for me to network with people from other school councils. (Learning Session Survey)**
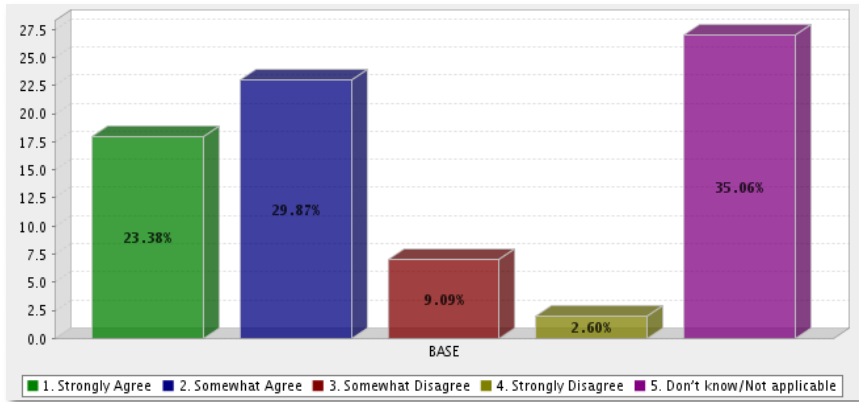


**Figure 5.6    The ASCA workshop(s) helped me to better understand the mandate of school councils.  (Learning Session Survey)**
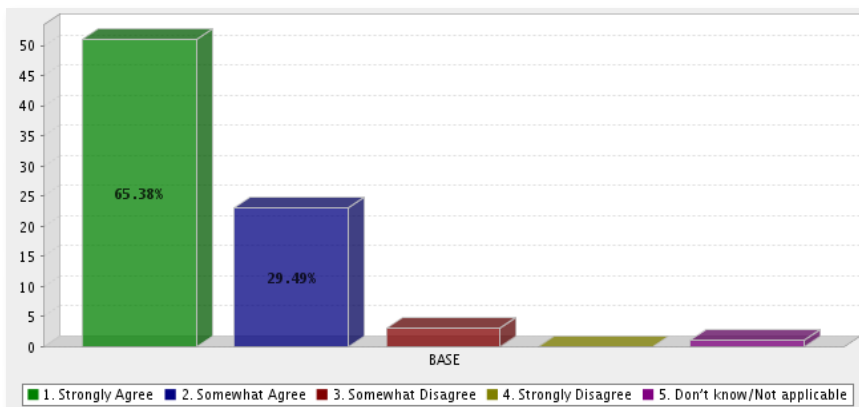
**Figure 5.7** The ASCA workshop(s) helped me to better understand my role on the school council.  (Learning Session Survey)
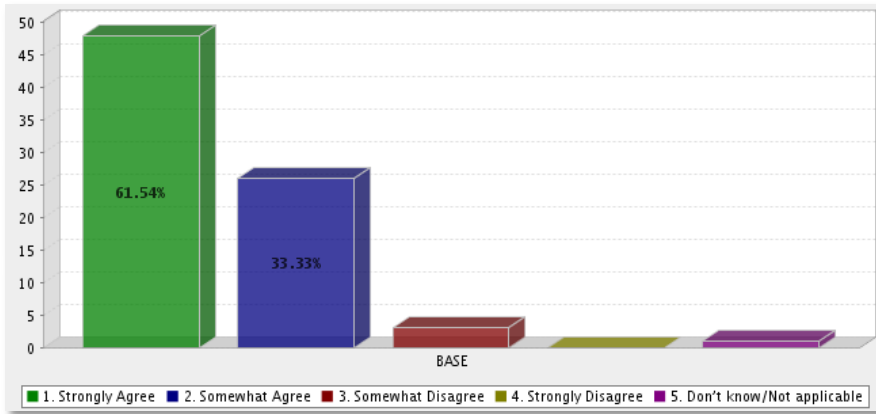


**Figure 5.8** The ASCA workshop(s) improved my overall knowledge of school councils. (Learning Session Survey)
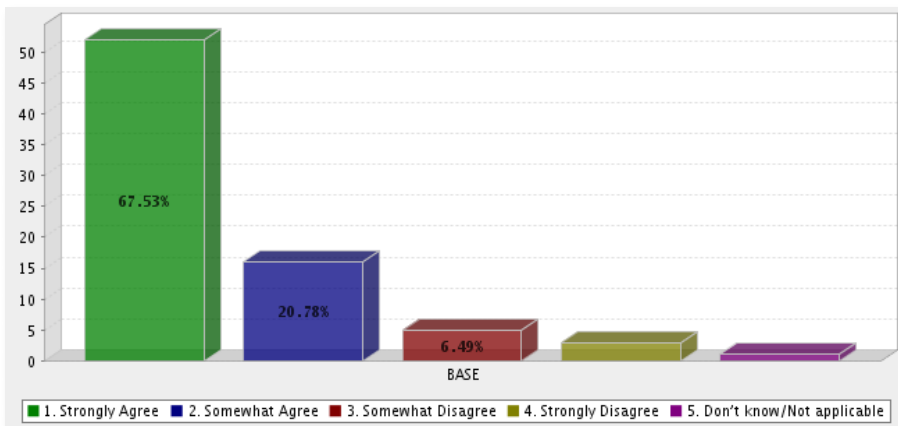
**Figure 5.9**     The ASCA workshop(s) were informative about school council involvement in school planning through the school's Three-Year Education Plan. (Learning Session Survey)
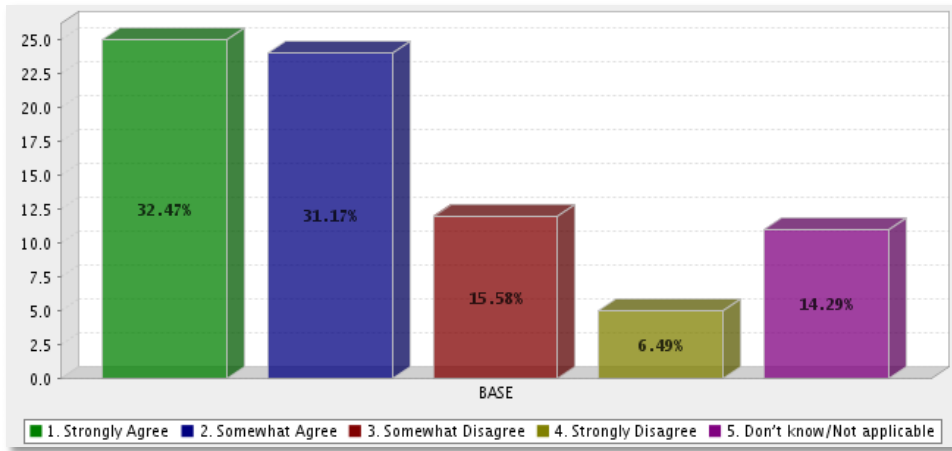


**Figure 5.10**    The ASCA workshop(s) were informative about ways in which school councils can influence school priorities for improving student achievement. (Learning Session Survey)
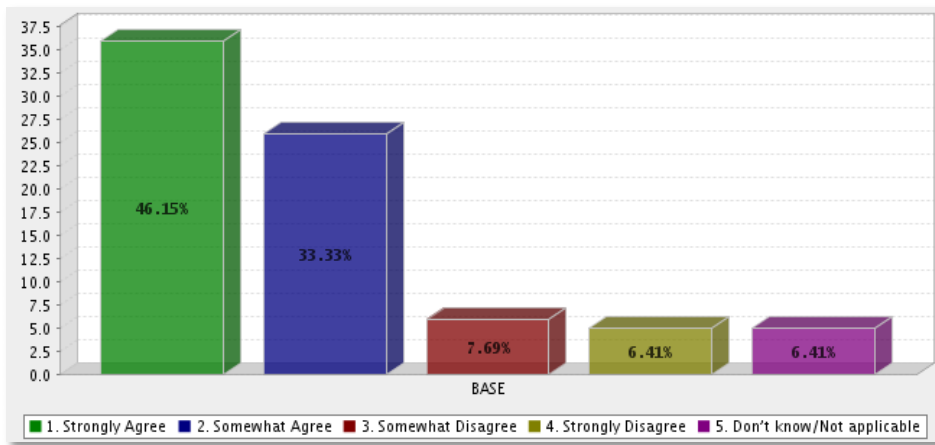
Figure 5.11 The ASCA workshop(s) were informative about ways in which school councils can build positive relationships with principals and stakeholders. (Learning Session Survey)
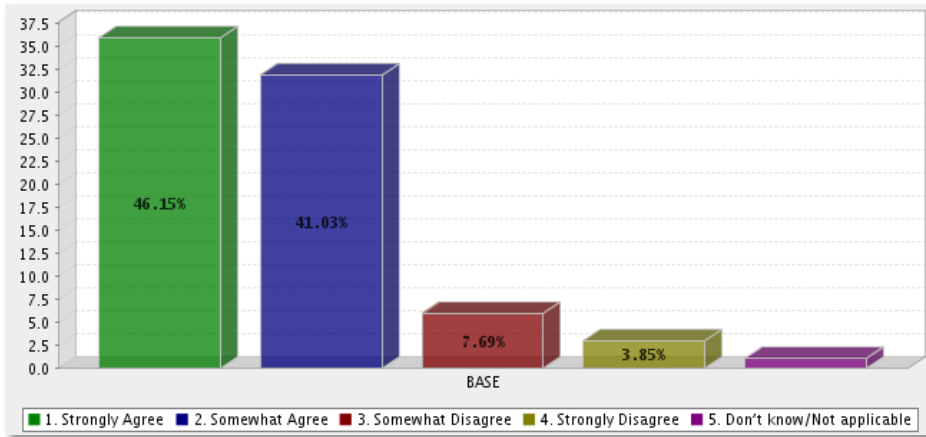


The superintendents and trustees we interviewed consistently expressed the view that school councils have very good access to learning. In their views, opportunities exceed the time available to participate, training is more effective when school councils identify focus areas for their learning, and ASCA workshops and conferences have generated positive feedback. Consistent with school and division survey data, the division level leaders felt that webinars and videoconferences are appreciated, but underutilized.

Figure 5.12    Our school councils have access to sufficient training to develop the competencies needed to provide advice and support to the school and to the jurisdiction on a variety of educational matters. (Learning Session Survey)
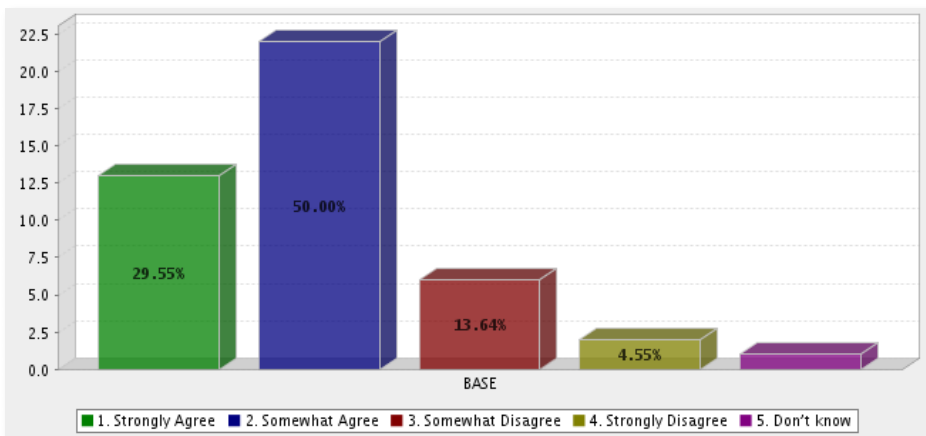


Similar views were evident on the division level survey. It indicated that 80% of superintendents and trustees strongly or somewhat agreed that school councils have access to sufficient training to develop the competencies needed to provide advice and support to the jurisdiction on a variety of educational matters.

## *Multiple Pathways to School Council Learning*

A second finding emerging from data is that school council members, principals, trustees and superintendents are aware of and take advantage of a wide variety of ways to learn more about school council effectiveness. These include informal individual and group learning, face-to-face workshops and conferences, webinars and videoconferences provided by ASCA, school divisions and others.

At the school and divisional levels, mentoring or one-to-one sharing offer valued and effective opportunities for the more experienced and/or more knowledgeable partner to support the learning of a person new to school council work. Passing the chair's gavel is often a lengthy and thoughtful process that involves several conversations. Similarly, principals and school council chairs in the case study schools frequently saw learning from each other as a significant component of their role relationship. Principals generally know the education system and the rules, whereas chairs know the community and bring a variety of other skillsets to their partnerships. Together they share energy and expertise to support student success through school community and culture building.

Interviewees from all levels spoke about the informal learning associated with school council networks. These are often, but not always, off springs of councils of school councils. In this same vein, the annual ASCA Conference is viewed as an important and effective learning event and networking opportunity. Many boards understand the value of the conference and consequently provide financial assistance for school council participants from their systems.

Participating school council representatives and principals indicated that school councils learn about their mandates through a variety of ways. While the Alberta School Council Resource Manual is a valuable support, some felt that it might be even more useful if divided into smaller and more specific segments. The ASCA website was also noted as a valuable learning resource.

School council meetings were similarly described as helpful opportunities for sharing information, discussing the mandate and role with other stakeholders. Principal presentations were uniformly valued as beneficial learning.

Participating trustees and superintendents reported similar perspectives. School councils learn about their mandates through informal mentorships, meeting participation and interaction with principals. They do value and use the Alberta School Council Resource Manual and other ASCA resources: workshops, the annual conference and material available on the website.

On more specific levels, school councils appear to have learned about and understand the distinctions between School Councils and Fundraising Societies. Presentations by principals, school board business departments and others have helped to make this distinction clear. While the separation is clear on paper, it is considerably harder to achieve in operation. Each of the

schools involved in the interviews have fundraising societies. In most cases, however, the same people are involved with both the society and the council.

Case study data further indicated that school councils learn about contributing to student learning in school through discussion of broad educational topics at Council of School Councils meetings and through dialogue with school principals on school plans and around topics related to instruction. Evidence from the same sources also indicated that school council members take action on a number of in-home strategies for supporting student learning that they pick up from engagement in division and school adult learning activities. In many cases, they learn from and apply knowledge gained from other parents in such settings.

Networking opportunities at Council of School Council functions and at the ASCA provincial conference are appreciated and provide important one to one learning.

## *School Council Learning Through Reciprocal School Partnerships*

The importance of partnering has been stressed throughout this report. The idea of reciprocal partnering is a third key finding from the data collected in relation to our third research question. At a variety of levels, the construct involves two-way learning and development. Networked learning, wherein people learn with and from each other is one example. ASCA's willingness to flexibly partner with school divisions is another. At the school level, an empowering notion is that there is merit in considering the learning needs of both educators and parents. In such reciprocal partnerships both parties contribute and both parties benefit.

Most school council and system level participants in this study are highly appreciative of the varied avenues of leadership and support provided by ASCA. The attention to diverse approaches to working with schools and divisions is seen as a major strength. ASCA's flexibility to lead learning in some divisions and to work as a partner with central office or the local school council network in other instances is an indicator of this flexibility.

An indication of ASCA's work as a partner is highlighted in Figure 5.13. School systems see the organization as a multi-faceted resource to support school councils.

Figure 5.13    What type of support has your school system sought from the Alberta
               School Councils' Association (ASCA) in the past three years?
               (School Division Survey)

Figure 5.13    What type of support has your school system sought from the Alberta
               School Councils' Association (ASCA) in the past three years?
               (School Division Survey)
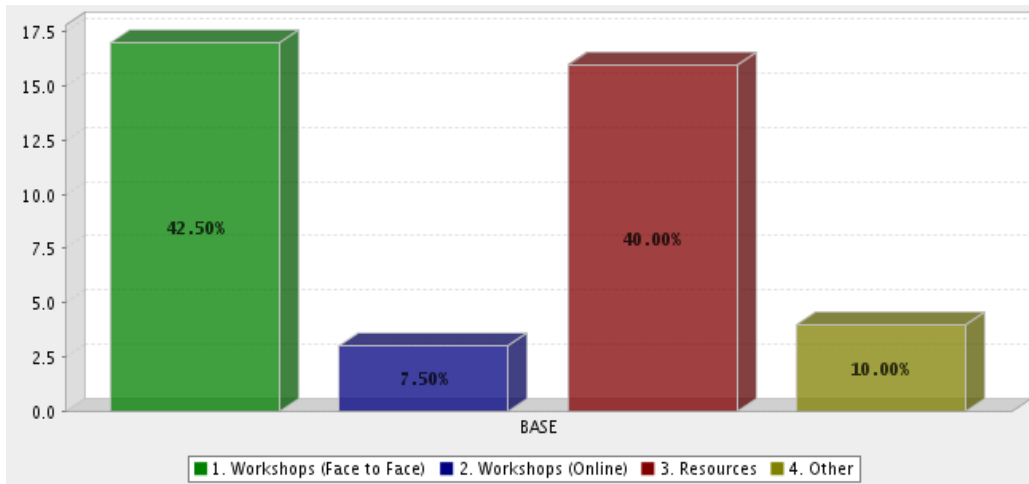


## *Resource Adequacy*

While maintaining involvement and sustaining membership are ongoing challenges, access to resources, including training and opportunities for networking are not widespread major concerns. Both interview and survey data support this view. Survey data from schools in Figure 5.14 and school systems in Figure 5.15 support this finding.

Figure 5.14    Our school council has access to adequate resources to achieve its goals.
               (School Survey)
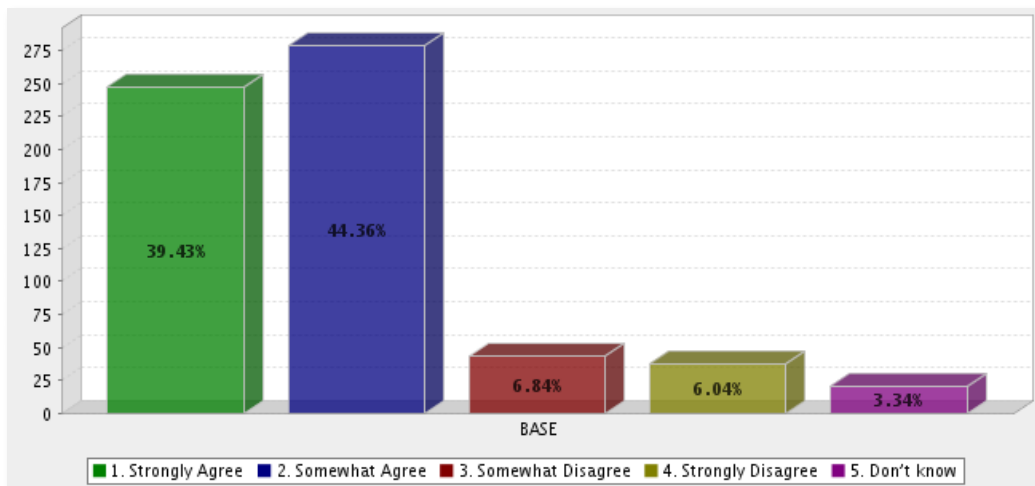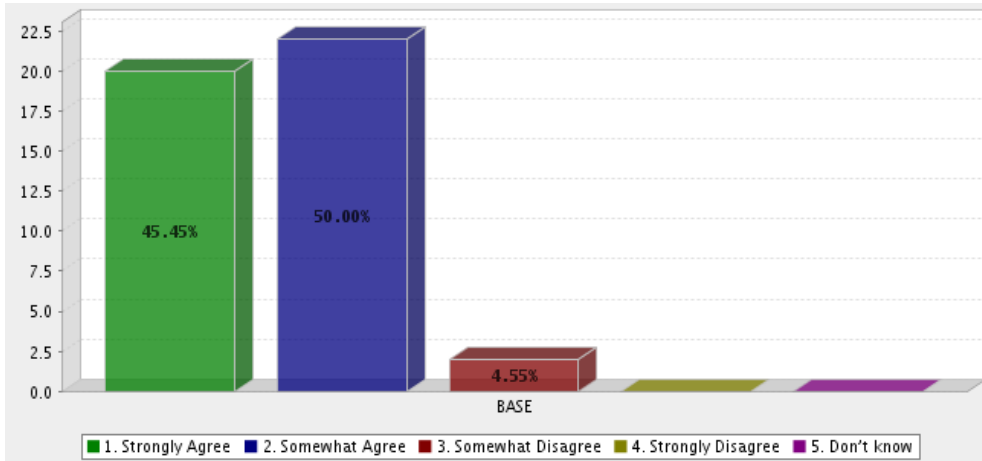
Maintaining membership numbers is sometimes problematic. Limited meeting participation is reported. Very few school councils have community members. On the other hand participation levels are relatively strong when it comes to carrying out planned council activities. As shown in section three, when there is something meaningful to be done to contribute to student success people are happy to become involved. The complexity of the situation is illustrated in Figure 5.16.

Figure 5.16    Our school council has sufficient members to fulfill its duties. (School Survey)
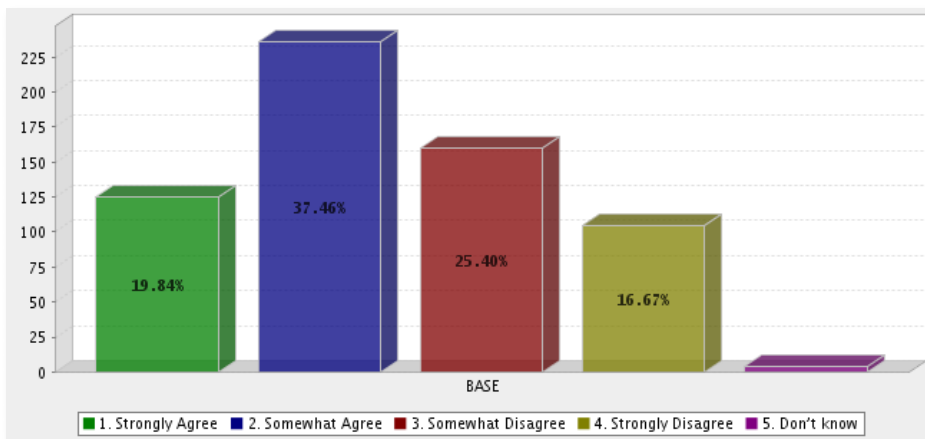


Data from all sources supports the importance of networking. Figures 5.17 and 5.18 show this first from the school point of view and then from the perspective of the school division.
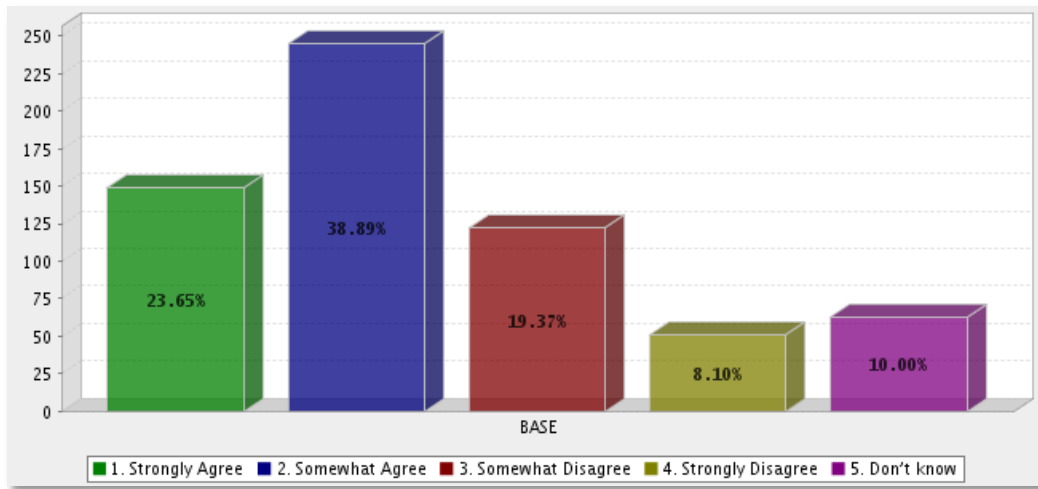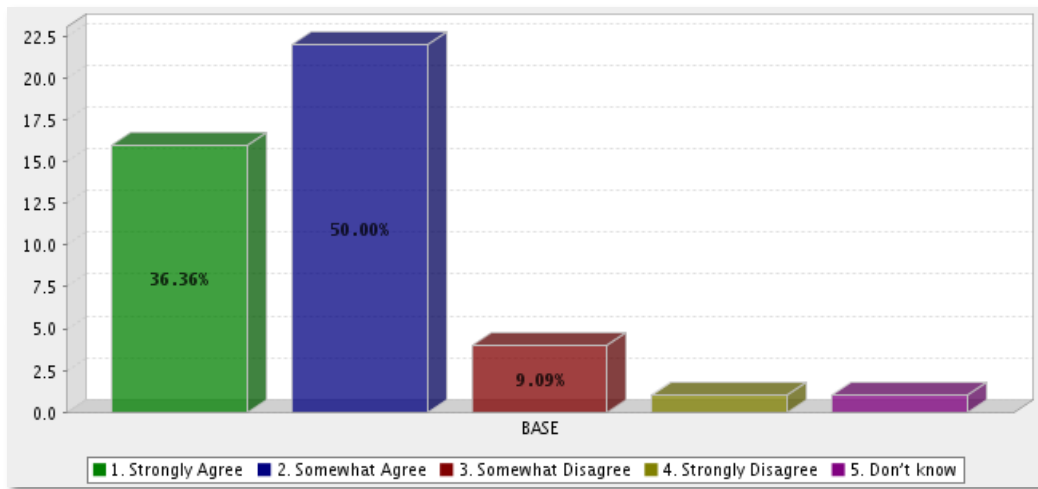
School Council Learning, Networking, and Resources – Summary and Recommendations
This section of *Inspired Partnerships: School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta* identified and discussed four key findings related research question three:

> WHAT IMPACTS ARE SCHOOL COUNCIL LEARNING, NETWORKING, AND RESOURCES HAVING ON SCHOOL COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS?

The four key findings reviewed in this section are:

1. Alberta school council members have a variety of opportunities to access high quality learning sessions and programs provided primarily by ASCA and school systems.

2. School council members, principals, trustees and superintendents are aware of and take advantage of a wide variety of ways to learn more about school council effectiveness. These include informal individual and group learning, face-to-face workshops and conferences, webinars and videoconferences provided by ASCA, school divisions and others.

3. The idea of reciprocal partnering has numerous benefits for school council learning. At a variety of levels, the construct involves two-way learning and development.

4. School council members, principals, superintendents and trustees believe that school councils have access to adequate resources.

The four findings on school council learning, networking and resources presented in this section, along with our analysis, and interpretations lead to the two following recommendations.

It is recommended that:

1. *ASCA continue to explore additional ways to market the high quality learning sessions it offers.*

2. *ASCA continue to diversify its learning and support resource offerings so that school council members might learn "anytime, anyplace and at any pace". Repackaging learning materials into short chunks, posting short videos on the website are just two examples suggested by participants.*

# INSPIRED PARTNERSHIPS
## School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta

## CONCLUSION

This mixed methods collective case study was guided by three aims related to school council contributions to student success in Alberta. Through online surveys and interviews in four representative school systems, we sought to understand principal, superintendent, trustee, and school council member perceptions of school council effectiveness. Investigating ways in which school councils can positively impact school and system planning was our second aim. A third intention was to examine the influence of school council learning, networking and resources have on school council effectiveness. This final section begins with summary commentary on these three areas and concludes with observations about the evolution of school council engagement in education in this province.

### Supporting Students as Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit through Inspired Partnerships

Eleven key findings and nine recommendations were presented and discussed in the preceding three sections of *Inspired Partnerships: School Council Contributions to Student Success in Alberta*. Section Three advanced three key findings and two recommendations related to school council effectiveness. Four findings and five recommendations to support even stronger school council contributions to student success through enhanced school and system planning were addressed in Section Four. Section Five examined the ways in which school council effectiveness is impacted by learning, networking and resources, leading to four findings and two recommendations. In this portion of our concluding section we look more generally at how the findings and recommendations can shape school council efforts to support educational transformation in Alberta as detailed in *Inspiring Education's* vision of students as *engaged thinkers* and *ethical citizens* with an *entrepreneurial spirit*.

In our analysis, many school councils are better positioned than ever to support school and school system efforts to foster student success in these transformative directions. Survey, interview and documentary data indicate that many school councils are now very well integrated into the functioning of their schools and school systems. Effective school and school system leaders understand that school councils do important work and make a variety of significant contributions to school and division learning cultures. Through two-way connections – partnerships – school councils help educators to better understand community contexts and, at the same time, take steps to help schools maintain positive learning environments.

Relationships are foundational to school council effectiveness. The principal's approach to working with members of the school council is particularly important in the relationship

building process. Relational trust between the principal and the chair is and will continue to be a vital contributor to how well the school council functions as an inspired partner in student success as the educational system moves forward with the transformational agenda.

Engagement in school and system planning can play an important role in strengthening parent – educator partnerships.  Participants in our study consistently indicated that school council members feel valued when their voices are included in such planning processes. More importantly, our findings reinforce research that demonstrates a strong relationship between such involvement and improved student learning (Gordon & Louis, 2012). Though the linkages between school council involvement and measures of student success are indirect, study participants and other research provide reason to believe that such engagement can be an important contributor.

Councils of school councils can serve as important vehicles for strengthening system-level planning and deepening community engagement during this time of educational transformation. Evidence from the four cases we examined is instructive on the benefits of fostering inspired partnerships of this kind. Ongoing connections with school council representatives across a school system can be of tremendous help to leaders navigating change. Sustained community dialogue on important and emerging educational initiatives and issues can build support and/or guide course adjustments to better address varying needs. These networks can provide an important two-way communication conduit between school communities and their school boards.

As the Ministry of Education moves forward with *Inspiring Education,* the voice of school councils at the provincial level will assume growing importance. ASCA plays a key role in effectively conveying the views of its members to the Ministry and to other stakeholders through the wide array of consultation opportunities provided by the province.  Our study shows that school council and system level participants are highly appreciative of the varied avenues of leadership and support provided by ASCA. The attention to diverse approaches to working with schools and divisions is seen as a major strength. The annual ASCA Conference is viewed as an important and effective learning event and networking opportunity.

### The Evolution of School Council Engagement in Alberta's Educational System
While this study has provided considerable evidence about stakeholder perceptions of school council contributions to student success in 2013, we were also interested in comparing these current perceptions with those reported by Raham and Bennet in *An Alberta School Council Survey: Realities, Perspectives and Challenges* (2008). Our analysis indicates that forms of collaboration and partnering have continued to evolve over the past few years. Evidence from this study – particularly data collected from the 32 interviews conducted in 12 schools and 4 school divisions – indicates that effective school councils are becoming increasingly well

integrated into the functioning of their schools. To a lesser extent, this trend is also evident in the level of school council engagement in many Alberta school systems. The steady efforts of ASCA and other education partners over this period have yielded a number of resources that have helped parents, trustees, teachers, and educational leaders to more fully understand both the benefits of and processes to strengthen the two-way partnerships that characterize effective school councils in this province.

The following overarching question was considered throughout our inquiry: *In what ways have stakeholder perceptions of school council effectiveness changed since the 2008 survey?* Though we have responded to this question in general ways in numerous parts of this report, we now address it more specifically in relation to the six following recommendations itemized by Raham and Bennet

1. *Create opportunities for meaningful involvement in educational planning.*
2. *Strengthen communication between principals and councils.*
3. *Provide explicit training in new roles and areas of need.*
4. *Increase council impact at the jurisdiction level.*
5. *Address the challenge of council membership.*
6. *Expand communication and network building among councils. (2008, pp. 71-72)*

Our report indicates that progress is strong on five of the six 2008 recommendations. Section Three of our study dealing with school council effectiveness highlights increasing recognition of importance of and progress on principal–school council relationships as called for in 2008 recommendation two. The same section and our school council planning section demonstrate progress on 2008 recommendation six. Progress on Raham and Bennet's recommendations one and four on school and system planning are also addressed in our section on planning. Steady progress on meeting school council learning needs is evident in section five of this report. While the challenge of active school council membership persists, participants consistently reported that when more specific help is needed parents generally step forward. There is no shortage of evidence to support the contention that school councils are evolving and moving forward as inspired partners making significant contributions to student success in Alberta.

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## APPENDIX A
### *Summary of Findings and Recommendations*

School Council Effectiveness

Research Question One:

**HOW DO SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERS, PRINCIPALS, SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL TRUSTEES PERCEIVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCILS?**

Findings:

1. Effective school councils are well integrated into the functioning of Alberta schools and school systems. They contribute to positive school cultures, do important work, and are viewed by parents, teachers, principals, superintendents and school trustees as having a significant role in the education system.

2. School council effectiveness hinges on the relational trust developed between the principal and the school council. The principal must work with the school council in an open and honest manner while respecting and encouraging input and advice from the parent community. It is essential that the principal is knowledgeable about the mandate of school councils and assists the members in learning about their roles and responsibilities.

3. When relational trust has been developed, school councils are more likely to contribute meaningfully to school and system efforts to enhance student success.

Recommendations

**It is recommended that:**

1. *School systems continue to develop the capacities of school principals to understand and embrace the mandates of school councils in ways that foster relational trust within the school communities.*

2. *School councils focus their efforts on understanding and supporting current educational initiatives designed to help all students to become engaged thinkers, ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit.*

Research Question Two:

**IN WHAT WAYS DOES SCHOOL COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL AND JURISDICTION PLANNING CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT SUCCESS?**

Findings:

1.  School councils generally set their priorities based on their informal analyses of how best to support school plans for achieving success for all students.

2.  There are a variety of methods of engaging school council members in meaningful and fulfilling approaches to supporting student success. School councils and educators are increasingly working as partners in this regard.

3.  School councils significantly contribute to school planning in one of three general ways. They discuss completed plans; they provide feedback and recommendations on draft plans; or they collaboratively review student achievement data and provide input near the beginning of the planning process.

4.  Councils of school councils are viewed as important mechanisms for system-level planning, navigating change and ongoing community dialogue on important and emerging educational initiatives and issues. These networks can provide an important two-way communication conduit between school communities and their school boards.

Recommendations

**It is recommended that:**

1.  *Parents continue to engage with their schools through attendance at regular school council meetings. Further to this recommendation, school council chairs need to ensure that meetings are purposeful, effective, and have a focused topic of interest.*

2.  *School systems develop policies and implementation plans to foster parental engagement at the school and system levels.*

3.  *School councils develop their own Three Year Plans that align with school and system plans.*

4.  *School councils seek out and represent the voice of the larger school community.*

5.  *School divisions purposely build the capacity of their councils of school councils to authentically contribute to system problem solving, planning and direction setting.*

School Council Learning, Networking and Resources

Research Question Three:

**WHAT IMPACTS ARE SCHOOL COUNCIL LEARNING, NETWORKING, AND RESOURCES HAVING ON SCHOOL COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS?**

Findings:

1. Alberta school council members have a variety of opportunities to access high quality learning sessions and programs provided primarily by ASCA and school systems.

2. School council members, principals, trustees and superintendents are aware of and take advantage of a wide variety of ways to learn more about school council effectiveness. These include informal individual and group learning, face-to-face workshops and conferences, webinars and videoconferences provided by ASCA, school divisions and others.

3. The idea of reciprocal partnering has numerous benefits for school council learning. At a variety of levels, the construct involves two-way learning and development.

4. School council members, principals, superintendents and trustees believe that school councils have access to adequate resources.

Recommendations

**It is recommended that:**

1. *ASCA continue to explore additional ways to market the high quality learning sessions it offers.*

2. *ASCA continue to diversify its learning and support resource offerings so that school council members might learn "anytime, anyplace and at any pace".  Repackaging learning materials into short chunks, posting short videos on the website are just two examples suggested by participants.*

## APPENDIX B
## *School Interview Protocol*

THE ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCIL STUDY: *School Council Interviews*

| Date: | Principal __Teacher __Chair __Parent __Community __ Student __ |
|---|---|
| Time: | Years of experience on this school council: |
| Place: | Years of experience on any school council: |

### Research Purpose
This study's purpose is to identify stakeholder perceptions of successes and challenges in school council operations, structures, communications and outreach, working relationships, training and resources. The study will also investigate the influence of school councils on student learning.

### Interview Procedure
The following open-ended questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled one hour conversation. The interview will be audio-recorded. You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview; you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish.

### Priorities, Planning and Operations
1. What are your school council's most important priorities?
2. Please describe the processes your school council uses to establish these priorities and how you develop plans to achieve them.
3. In what ways does your school council engage with the larger school community? How does it seek advice? What strategies and tools are used to keep community members informed?
4. In what ways does your school council
   a. influence school priorities for improving student achievement?
   b. build positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders?
   c. contribute to school and division planning?
5. Is there anything else on the topic of *Priorities, Planning and Operations* that you would like to share with the research team at this time?

### Training and Development
1. Please describe any school council development training workshops undertaken this year. Who provided the workshop(s), what topics were addressed and what learning outcomes were achieved?
2. As a school council member, how have you learned about or developed your knowledge of
   a. the mandate of school councils?
   b. your role on the school council?

c. school council involvement in the school's Three-Year Education Plan?
d. the differences between a school council and a fundraising society?
e. ways in which school councils can contribute to student learning in the school?
3. Are there additional training and development needs that could be addressed by the Alberta School Councils' Association?
4. Please feel free to comment on the overall effectiveness of the school council training and development workshops in which you have participated. What contributed to their effectiveness? What could have improved their effectiveness?
5. Is there anything else on the topic of *Training and Development* that you would like to share with the research team at this time?

## Resources, Support and Networking
1. Please comment on the adequacy of your school council's
   a. access to resources to achieve its priorities.
   b. number of members to fulfill its mandate.
   c. access to training to develop skills to meet its mandate.
   d. opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils
2. Is there anything else on the topic of *Resources, Support and Networking* that you would like to share with the research team at this time?

## Successes and Challenges
1. What have been your school council's most important accomplishments this year? In each case what were the key factors that contributed to the success?
2. What challenges did you face this year? What strategies did you employ to address each challenge?
3. What challenges are anticipated in the upcoming school year? Please share any strategies that you plan to employ to address these?

## School Council Effectiveness
1. Please comment on the your school council's effectiveness in the following areas:
   a. influencing school priorities for improving student achievement.
   b. building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders.
   c. playing a meaningful role in school division improvement processes.
2. Please comment on the overall operation of your school council. What contributes to its effectiveness? What could improve its effectiveness?

## Further Comments
Please feel free to provide any further comments on your school council or on this study in general.

# APPENDIX C
## *Division Interview Protocol*

THE ALBERTA SCHOOL COUNCIL STUDY: *School Division Interviews*

| Date: | Superintendent __Board Chair __ |
|---|---|
| Time: | Years of experience with Division: |
| Place: | Notes: |

### Research Purpose
This study's purpose is to identify stakeholder perceptions of successes and challenges in school council operations, structures, communications and outreach, working relationships, training and resources. The study will also investigate the influence of school councils on student learning.

### Interview Procedure
The following open-ended questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled 45 to 60 minute conversation. The interview will be audio-recorded. You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview; you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish.

### Context/Notes

### Priorities, Planning and Operations
1. When you think about the school councils in your school division, what do you believe to be a few of their most important priorities?
2. Please comment on the general ways that your school councils engage with their larger school communities.
3. In what ways do your school councils
   a. influence school priorities for improving student achievement?
   b. build positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders?
   c. contribute to school and division planning?
4. If your division has a Council of School Councils, please share your thoughts on its operations and effectiveness. If you do not have one, please explain.
5. Is there anything else on the topic of *Priorities, Planning and Operations* that you would like to share with the research team at this time?

### Training and Development
1. How do your school councils and their members learn about
   a. the mandate and role of school councils?

b. the differences between school councils and fundraising societies?

c. ways in which school councils can contribute to student learning in the school?

2. Please comment on the overall effectiveness of the school council training and development workshops that have been offered in your division. What contributed to their effectiveness? What could have improved their effectiveness?

3. Are there additional training and development needs that could be addressed by the Alberta School Councils' Association?

4. Is there anything else on the topic of *Training and Development* that you would like to share with the research team at this time?

## Resources, Support and Networking

1. Please comment on the adequacy of your school councils'

a. access to resources to achieve their priorities.

b. number of members to fulfill their mandates.

c. access to training and development opportunities.

d. opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils.

2. Is there anything else on the topic of *Resources, Support and Networking* that you would like to share with the research team at this time?

## Successes and Challenges

1. What have been the most important accomplishments of your school councils this year?

2. What challenges have your school councils faced this year?

3. What challenges are anticipated in the upcoming school year? Please share any strategies that you plan to employ to address these.

## School Council Effectiveness

1. Please comment on the effectiveness your school councils in the following areas:

a. influencing school priorities for improving student achievement.

b. building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders.

c. playing a meaningful role in school division planning and improvement processes.

2. Please comment on the overall operation of your school councils. What contributes to their effectiveness? What could improve their effectiveness?

## Further Comments

Please feel free to provide any further comments on your school council or on this study in general.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify stakeholder perceptions of the effectiveness, successes and challenges in school council operations, structures, communications and outreach, working relationships, training and resources. The study will also investigate the influence of school councils on student learning.

Overall findings of the study will be available through the Alberta School Councils' Association in the fall of 2013.

### Informed Consent Statement

Your participation in completing this survey is <u>totally voluntary</u>. All responses will remain confidential and anonymity is assured. All identifiers will be removed for the final report, which will only include aggregated data.  *By marking "I agree", you are consenting to participate in the survey.*

1.    I have read the above information and agree to participate in the survey.

      I agree      ☐

PART I                BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.    What is your position on the school council?

      Principal                        ☐
      Teacher                         ☐
      Chair                            ☐
      Parent                           ☐
      Community Member                 ☐
      Student Member                   ☐

3.    How long have you been on this school council?

      Less than 1 year                 ☐
      1 year to less than 2 years      ☐
      2 years to less than 3 years     ☐
      3 or more years                  ☐

4.    How many total years of experience do you have on any school council?

      Less than 1 year                 ☐
      1 year to less than 2 years      ☐
      2 years to less than 3 years     ☐
      3 or more years                  ☐

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

5.  Our school council follows consistent operating procedures/by-laws and decision-making processes.

6.  Our school council uses formal communication tools to keep all members informed.

7.  Our school council has an effective process for resolving conflicts.
    Strongly Agree
    Somewhat Agree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Strongly Disagree
    Don't know

Please answer each of the following questions:

8.  Does your school council seek advice from the school community?

9.  Does your school council refer to the provincial legislation for guidance?

10. Does your school council refer to school and division policy for guidance?

11. Does your school council provide advice on the school's three-year Education Plan and Annual Results report?
    Yes
    No
    Don't know

12. Has your school council established its own three-year plan?
    Yes
    No
    Don't know

    *If no or do not know, please proceed to question 18*

13. Does your school council evaluate its three-year plan on an annual basis?
    Yes
    No
    Don't know

14. Please identify the three most important goals/priorities established by the school council this year.

15. What tools has the school council used this year for communicating with or gathering feedback from the school community?  (please select all that apply)

    Meetings
    Newsletters
    Formal reports
    Surveys
    Website
    Sitting on Committees and Task Forces
    Other (please specify)
    Don't know

16. What kinds of consultations/discussions was your school council involved in during the past year? (select all that apply)

    School calendar
    School policy development or review
    Code of conduct
    Division policy development or review
    School Budget
    Preparation of the school's three-year plan
    School programs
    Preparation of the Division's three-year plan
    School goals and priorities
    Community Issues
    Student Achievement
    Other (please specify)
    Don't know

17. What percentage of school council time was spent on each of the following activities during the past year?

    *If you are unsure of the exact breakdown, please provide your best approximations.  Your responses must add up to 100%.  If you are truly unable to estimate, you may check "don't know".*

    Providing advice to the school principal          _____%
    Providing advice to the division          _____%
    Consulting/reporting to parents & community   _____%
    Workshops and training         _____%
    Networking with other school councils     _____%
    Fundraising         _____%
    Other (please specify)         _____%
        Total         _____% (should be 100%)
    Don't know

18. In what ways was your school council <u>involved in developing or revising</u> the School's Three-Year Education Plan during the past year? (select all that apply)

Explanation and discussion of the completed Plan

Providing feedback and recommendations on the Draft Plan

Consultations during the development of the Plan

Advising on school initiatives in the Plan

Reviewing student achievement data with respect to school improvement planning

Participating on related school committees

Other (please specify)

Don't know

19. In what ways has your school council <u>supported the implementation</u> of priorities and goals set out in the School's Three-Year Education Plan? (select all that apply)

Suggesting council activities to support the goals in the Plan

Membership on committees on specific school initiatives

Providing information to parents

Gathering information or conducting surveys

Funding of specific initiatives

Developing a formal Council Plan to support the School Plan

Other (please specify):_____

Don't know

PART III  TRAINING and DEVELOPMENT

20. Are you aware that the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) provides training workshops for school councils?

Yes

No

21. Did your council participate in one or more School Council Development training workshops this year?

Yes   (Go to Question )

No

Don't know

22. Who provided this training?

ASCA

Other _____

Don't know

23. Did you personally participate in school council training workshop(s) this year?
    Yes
    No


Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

24. The workshop(s) explained the mandate of school councils.

25. The workshop(s) were informative about my role on the school council.

26. The workshop(s) were informative about school council involvement in school improvement planning through the school's Three-Year Education Plan.

27. The workshop(s) were informative about the differences between a school council and a fundraising society.
    Strongly Agree
    Somewhat Agree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Strongly Disagree
    Don't know


PART IV RESOURCES, SUPPORT and NETWORKING

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

28. Our school council has access to adequate resources to achieve its goals.

29. Our school council has sufficient members to fulfill its duties.

30. Our school council has access to sufficient training to develop the skills necessary to meet its mandate.

31. Our school council has adequate opportunity to network with and learn from other school councils.

32. Our school council has timely access to the information and documents required to do its work.

33. Our school council has adequate resources (handbooks, templates, etc.) to facilitate its work.

34. Our school council has adequate tools and support for communication and data-gathering.
    Strongly Agree
    Somewhat Agree
    Somewhat Disagree
    Strongly Disagree
    Don't know

35. Identify your top three priorities for school council member training and in-service.

36. Identify your <u>most useful</u> school council resource.

37. Identify your top three priorities for additional resources or support.

## SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

38. Identify the three most important accomplishments of the school council this year.

39. Identify three challenges the council has faced this year.

40. Identify three challenges the school council anticipates will require strategic planning in the upcoming school year.

How would you rate your school council's effectiveness this past year in the following areas,

41. Influencing school priorities for improving student achievement?

42. Building positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders?

43. Playing a meaningful role in school district improvement processes?
    Very effective
    Somewhat effective
    Not very effective
    Not at all effective
    Don't know

Thank you for your responses. Please use the space below to provide us with any further comments on your school council or on the survey in general.

# APPENDIX E
## *Division Survey*

### Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to identify stakeholder perceptions of the effectiveness, successes and challenges in school council operations, structures, communications and outreach, working relationships, training and resources. The study will also investigate the influence of school councils on student learning.

Overall findings of the study will be available through the Alberta School Councils' Association in the fall of 2013.

### Informed Consent Statement
Your participation in completing this survey is totally voluntary. All responses will remain confidential and anonymity is assured. All identifiers will be removed for the final report, which will only include aggregated data. *By marking "I agree", you are consenting to participate in the survey.*

1. I have read the above information and agree to participate in the survey.
   I agree  ☐

PART I          BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. What is your position in the Division?
   Superintendent (or Designate)          ☐
   Board Chair (or Designate)          ☐

PART II          SURVEY

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding school councils (collectively) in your Division.

3. Our school councils have access to sufficient training to develop the competencies needed to provide advice and support to the school and to the jurisdiction on a variety of educational matters.

4. Our school councils have adequate opportunity to network and learn from other school councils.

5. Our school councils have timely access to the information and documents required to do their work.

6. Our school councils have access to adequate resources to meet their responsibilities as set out in the school council regulation.
   Strongly Agree
   Somewhat Agree
   Somewhat Disagree
   Strongly Disagree
   Don't know

Please rate the effectiveness of your school councils this past year in:

7.  Influencing school priorities for improving student achievement.

8.  Building positive relationships with principals and other school and community stakeholders.

9.  Playing meaningful roles in system improvement processes.
    Very effective
    Somewhat effective
    Not very effective
    Not at all effective
    Don't know

10. Has your school system sought support from the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) in the past three years?
    Yes
    No

    *If yes, please proceed to question 11*

    *If no, please use the space below to explain why your system has not chosen to use ASCA's services and then proceed to question 12*

11. What type of support has your school system sought from the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) in the past three years?
    Select all that apply
    ☐ Workshops (Face to Face)
    ☐ Workshops (Online)
    ☐ Resources
    ☐ Other – Please specify below

12. Does your jurisdiction ensure all school councils are provided with their school's results on the provincial testing program, an interpretation of these results, and the school's annual education plan and annual results report?

    Yes, No, Don't know


Thank you for your responses.

## APPENDIX F
### *School Council Learning Session Survey*

Purpose of this Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gather feedback from School Council members who have recently participated in learning sessions, online training and videoconference workshops offered by the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA).

Findings from this survey will be reported in the Alberta School Council Study, which will be available through the Alberta School Councils' Association in the fall of 2013.

Informed Consent Statement

Your participation in completing this survey is <u>totally voluntary</u>. All responses will remain confidential and anonymity is assured. All identifiers will be removed for the final report, which will only include aggregated data. *By marking "I agree", you are consenting to participate in the survey.*

1. I have read the above information and agree to participate in the survey.
   I agree ☐

PART I        BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. What is your position on the school council?
   Principal ☐
   Teacher ☐
   Chair ☐
   Parent ☐
   Community Member ☐
   Student Member ☐

3. How long have you been on this school council?
   Less than 1 year ☐
   1 year to less than 2 years ☐
   2 years to less than 3 years ☐
   3 or more years ☐

4. How many total years of experience do you have on any school council?
   Less than 1 year ☐
   1 year to less than 2 years ☐
   2 years to less than 3 years ☐
   3 or more years ☐

5. Please indicate the type(s) of learning session in which you have participated
   Face to face ☐
   Webinar ☐
   Video-Conference ☐

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

        Strongly Agree
        Somewhat Agree
        Somewhat Disagree
        Strongly Disagree
        Don't know/Not applicable

The learning session(s) I attended

6.  were well organized.

7.  were led by an effective presenter/facilitator.

8.  were a good use of my time.

9.  were enjoyable.

10. provided opportunities for me to network with people from other school councils.

11. helped me to better understand the mandate of school councils.

12. helped me to better understand my role on the school council.

13. were informative about school council involvement in school planning through the school's Three-Year Education Plan.

14. improved my overall knowledge of school councils.

15. were informative about ways in which school councils can influence school priorities for improving student achievement.

16. were informative about ways in which school councils can build positive relationships with the principal and other stakeholders.

Please use the space below for comments and suggestions to help us to provide the best possible learning and training experiences for school council members in the upcoming year.