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Pioneering Participatory Governance:

Networks of School Councils in Two Alberta School Jurisdictions

By

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ABSTRACT

This interpretive study examined in what ways networks of school councils in two Alberta jurisdiction enabled meaningful involvement from the perspectives of seven parents, two trustees, and three administrators. Involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful was authentic and enabled the network participants to have an informed understanding of the public education system; to participate in deliberations about philosophies, policies, programs, plans, priorities, and budgets; to act in ways that enriched the public education system; to effectively fulfill their roles and responsibilities as school council members and trustees; and to discuss educational matters openly and honestly at the network meetings. Networks of school councils which provided genuine opportunities for meaningful involvement required a conception of public education as a shared responsibility and enabled participatory governance of the public education system. A major theme that emerged from this study was that meaningful involvement is a fragile and tenuous ideal.

CHAPTER 4: REVIEW, REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter provides an overview of the study, relates the research findings to the literature and provides reflections and recommendations based on the research findings. These are discussed within the context of an emerging conceptual framework about the nature of involvement that is perceived and experienced as meaningful.

Summary of the Study

Purpose

My purpose in studying these networks of school councils was to understand the experiences and perceptions of those who participated in them. In doing so I hoped to learn if these networks of school councils enabled involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful and, if so, the nature of such involvement.

The central questions that guided this study were: Does participation in a network of school councils enable meaningful involvement in the public education system? And, if so, in what ways? A number of more specific questions served as guides to the study and to the analysis of the data. These questions are as follows:

1. What led to the development of these networks of school councils?
2. What were the goals of these networks of school councils?
3. How were these networks of school councils implemented?
4. What sustained their implementation?
5. What were the benefits of these networks of school councils?
6. What was the nature of involvement experienced or perceived as meaningful?

Methodology

This interpretive, exploratory case study was designed to examine the operation of networks of school councils in at least two Alberta school jurisdictions from the perspectives of the individuals who participated in them. The intent was to understand if participation in these networks enabled "meaningful involvement" and , if so, in what ways? A purposive sampling procedure was used to select seven parents, two trustees and

three administrators who served as key informants about the network of school councils. Though semi-structured interviews were the source of the data used in this study, participants were encouraged to talk about networks of school councils and meaningful involvement from their individual perspectives.

To maintain trustworthiness of the data for credibility and dependability the transcripts and data analysis were reviewed by colleagues and by the respondents for their revision and comments. A interpretive approach, which reflects the respondent's perceptions about networks of school councils and meaningful involvement, was used in reporting the data.

The Networks of School Councils

Networks of school councils are now beginning to form in some Alberta school jurisdictions. They are new entities and they are not required by the School Act. They provide another avenue for parental and school council involvement in the public education system. Networks of school councils operating in two different school jurisdictions were the focus of this study. These networks were volunteer organizations which existed simply because those who participate in them chose to do so. The purpose of these networks was to create a mechanism for school council representatives to meet with each other and with representatives from central administration and the board of trustees.

One jurisdiction had policy in place to guide the operation and functioning of the network of school councils. The policy enabling this network had been developed through a consultation process which sought school council input in the development of the policy and school council ownership of the network of school councils. This network was formally established in February of 1996 and was open to participation by all of the school councils in the jurisdiction. Of the 30 school councils, approximately 15-20 were represented, usually by one school council representative who was a parent, at each network meeting. In addition to the school council representatives, the superintendent, the chairperson of the board of trustees, the communications director of the jurisdiction, and the local representative of the Alberta Teachers' Association also attended each meeting. Principals usually did not attend the network meetings but were welcome to attend, if they chose to do

so, as was anyone else who was a member of a school council within the jurisdiction or a member of the board of trustees. Even though the principals did not usually attend the network meetings they did receive a copy of the minutes of these meetings. This network had been preceded by another umbrella organization of school councils which ceased to exist when school boards were amalgamated in this region.

The other jurisdiction did not have policy in place enabling the networks of school councils which were in operation. In this jurisdiction, the networks of school councils were grass-roots initiatives of the school councils which participated in them and simply existed because those who participated in them chose to do so. During the time of this study I was aware of two networks of school councils which were operating in this jurisdiction.

The first of these two networks began operating in June of 1995. It did not involve all of the approximately 80 school councils in the jurisdiction. Participation in this network was open only to those 12 school councils whose schools were located within the boundaries of the network. Eight to ten school councils were typically represented at each network meeting. Each school council was encouraged to send at least two representatives to the meetings. While not every school council sent two, there often were two and sometimes even more than two parent representatives from the same school council, in attendance. Some of the school principals or vice principals or both attended the network meetings as well. In addition, the school trustees whose ridings included the school councils who participated in the network were also invited to attend the network meetings. While there were three trustees who were eligible to attend these meetings only one of them attended on a regular basis. The minutes of these meetings were sent to one of the school council representatives and the school principal of each school council that was eligible to participate in the network. The Superintendent and the eligible trustees also received copies of the minutes.

A second network was operating in this jurisdiction at the time of this study. It began as a grass-roots initiative in the fall of 1997 and was modeled on the above network. This network met four times during the 1997-98 school year and their meetings usually had 6 or 7 out of a possible 13 school councils represented. According to the respondents, this network met with considerable resistance from one school principal and was not actively

supported by any of their trustees and, as a result, ceased to operate at the end of the 1997-98 school year. In addition to these networks an umbrella group of school councils also operated in the jurisdiction. This umbrella group had been in existence for about ten years and was the formally recognized body for school council participation.

The original umbrella groups which preceded these networks of school councils were initiated and operated by central administration and the board of trustees. Dissatisfaction and frustration with the nature of the involvement that was available to parents and school councils through participation in these umbrella groups led to the development of the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study. It was the intention of those who initiated these new networks to create organizations that would enable more meaningful involvement.

Major Findings

What I discovered was that these networks of school councils did enable more meaningful involvement than the original school council umbrella groups and there were some common elements of involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful. The ways that these networks of school councils enabled meaningful involvement appeared to be linked to four key conditions.

First, the extent to which the network provided genuine opportunities for authentic participation of the school council representatives, in the public education system. Second, the extent to which the network enabled the school council representatives to have an informed understanding of the public education system. Third, the extent to which the networks enabled the school council representatives to participate in deliberations about educational matters, to act in ways that made a positive contribution to the public education system, and to be effective participants in the public education system. Fourth, the extent to which the networks enabled the school council representatives to talk to each other openly, honestly, and freely and to share information with each other about educational matters.

I also discovered that a common sense of uneasiness was inherent to involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful. A major theme that emerged from this study was that meaningful involvement is a fragile and tenuous ideal.

Reflections on the Findings as Related to the Literature

This study offers some insight into the essential elements of involvement that is perceived or experienced as meaningful and how participatory reforms can both succeed and fail to result in meaningful involvement. While much is written in the education literature about the need for parental participation and community involvement in the public education system, it is becoming apparent that, in actual practice, participation and involvement are more rhetoric than reality. As Anderson (1998) points out,

> Current educational reforms . . . contain a pervasive discourse of participation. Although calls for participation of teachers, students, parents, communities, business, and numerous other stakeholders in school are central to most reforms, there is increasing evidence that much participatory reform is either bogus, superficial or ineffective. (p.571)

The findings of this study support Anderson's claim. The central purpose of these networks of school councils was to enable meaningful involvement in the public education system. Those who initiated these networks were dissatisfied and frustrated with the original school council umbrella groups. At best, they felt these umbrella groups simply paid "lip service" to the notion of meaningful involvement. At worst, they felt manipulated and misled. They wanted an organization of school councils that would provide them with meaningful–not token–involvement. A number of challenges and barriers had to be overcome to create the necessary conditions for these networks to achieve their intended purpose. The first task that these networks faced was to create an organization that provided genuine opportunities for authentic participation in the public education system.

Genuine Opportunities for Authentic Participation

Anderson (1998) suggests that current attempts to implement participatory reform are often unsuccessful because they are intended to maintain the status quo rather than enable transformative change throughout the system. He identifies four key sources of inauthenticity in participatory reforms. First, that participation is undertaken more as an exercise in public relations and an attempt to maintain the legitimacy of the organization, rather than actually devolving any power or control of the organization to the participants. Second, participation is implemented as a disciplinary practice and form of control, rather

than as a means to empower the participants. Third, participation becomes a form of collusion which maintains the status quo rather than a form of participation that enables transformative change. Fourth, participation is implemented as a form of consumerism, rather than as a form of citizenship.

Inauthentic Participation

According to Mann (1976) participation is merely a form of public relations when it promotes: "'(1) One-way communications, (2) a concentration on support for existing arrangements, (3) a definition of the citizen as dependent consumer, and (4) a definition of the educator as an autonomous professional'" (as cited in Anderson, 1998, p.576).

Clearly the original umbrella groups that preceded these networks of school councils were operating in the public relations paradigm. Communication was "top-down" and a "one way street"; the agenda was determined and controlled by central administration or the board of trustees, or both; and items that challenged the status quo were rarely, if ever, discussed at the meetings [and in one instance were even removed from the agenda]; parents and citizens were seen as dependent and passive recipients of information that administration felt they either wanted or needed to know; and the professionals or the politicians decided if and when they would seek parental and school council input on policy.

Rather than actually empowering the parents or school councils, these original umbrella groups simply served as a means to disseminate information to parents. Parents and school councils did not control the meetings, could not contribute to the agenda, could not access the necessary information to participate meaningfully in deliberations about education matters, and did not have any formal role in the policy-making process. Accordingly, these original umbrella groups were perceived by the respondents to be nothing more than "token" attempts by central administration and the board of trustees to pay "lip service" to the notion of parental and school council involvement. Anderson (1998) describes activities undertaken by centralized bureaucracies to give the appearance of democratic participation and responsiveness to local need, but which do not actually

require the central bureaucracy to give up any of its power or control of the organization, as "legitimating rituals."

Some of the parents who participated in these original school council umbrella groups became tired and frustrated with the superficial and contrived approach of the umbrella groups. Instead of public relations and legitimating rituals, these parents wanted organizations of school councils that would actually enable them to participate in deliberations about educational matters with central administration and the board of trustees.

Anderson (1998) advises that participatory reforms which are intended to increase democratic participation often result in the participants buying into the vision and goals which have been determined, not by the participants, but elsewhere. "In most management and leadership models, participation is not used to create or challenge goals but to incorporate members into existing ones" (p.579). This results in what Barker (1993) describes as "'concertive control'" rather than bureaucratic control (as cited in Anderson, 1998, p.579). According to Anderson,

> The potential exercise of power by superordinates through concertive control has important implications for participatory decision-making . . . . Participation becomes a potential disciplinary practice that embodies forms of unobtrusive or nonovert control in which control no longer appears to come from outside the organizational members' sphere of activities. According to Barker (1993) the "relative success of participatory approaches hinges not on reducing control but on achieving a system of control that is more effective than that of other systems (p.433)." (1998, p.580)

Unlike the original umbrella groups, these networks of school councils were intended to actually empower the parents and school councils and enable them to participate in deliberations about educational matters. The participants in these networks did not want the networks to become yet another form of "concertive control." As one parent explained,

> Previously the superintendent would stand up and he would chair the meeting. (It was always a he.) He would chair the meeting, and had set the agenda–so there wasn't a whole lot of opportunity to impact that. But, with the election of a chair from one of the reps to the [Network of School Councils] that substantially altered that situation and we had a great deal more control over the organization.

It appears that these networks of school councils were an attempt to militate against what Waller termed the *authority principle.* According to Johnson and Pajares,

> Writing in 1932, Waller observed that schools are organized around an authority principle–a basic system of domination and subordination that permeates educational organizations from the classroom to the highest levels of school governance. The findings of Malen et al. (1990a) suggest that the authority principle is still in effect and is not necessarily altered by the creation of new governance structures. (as cited in Johnson & Pajares, 1996, pp. 600-601)

Certainly this was the experience of the participants who initiated these networks of school councils. The purpose of these networks was to alter the system of communication and subordination that characterized the original school council umbrella groups, and, in doing so, alter the status quo with respect to the role that parents and school councils played in the public education system.

Anderson also advises that "even when participation is reasonably egalitarian, it has seldom challenged the educational status quo" (1998, p. 580). This is due, in part, to the fact that "'school administrators and teachers tend to share a common professional culture and often collude against lay outsiders, generally dominating shared decision-making councils'" (Johnson & Pajares as cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 581). School administrators, according to Henry (1996), usually favour empowering the school staff over empowering the parents and when the positions between the two groups are contested will typically favour the staff over the parents (as cited in Anderson, 1998). As well, Anderson points out that participatory groups which are meant to foster dialogue often end up fostering a "professional monologue" because the participants defer to the professionals. This, he maintains, is often due to the power that is embedded in the hierarchy of professional knowledge "that places expert professional knowledge–replete with test scores, technical language, and institutional authority–at the top" (p.581).

The participants in these networks of school councils described the original umbrella groups as a professional monologue and they did not want this to reoccur in the networks of school councils. Rather, their first priority was to provide time for the school council representatives to talk to each other openly and honestly about anything that was of interest to them within the school system (other than personnel or individual student

concerns). This meant that steps had to be taken so that the meetings could not be used by the trustees and central administration to download information to the school council representatives. This was not a problem for the trustees who participated in this study. These trustees indicated that their preferred role was to listen to the discussion that occurred during these network meetings, rather than download information, because it assisted them to make better decisions at the board table. They were willing to provide information if asked, and to provide an update on current or upcoming issues, but their primary raison d'être was to listen to the discussion. As one trustee explained,

> I get to listen directly to the dialogue and I underline listen because I think that's important. Yes, I share information, but I tend not to participate in the debates that go on there. I try to listen because these are the issues that are important. I, in turn, can go back to the school board and speak with much greater confidence as to, not only the complaints that I get from individual constituents, but again, to those aspirations, and wishes and concerns that are collectively there in the schools in the geographic jurisdiction that I represent.

Anderson (1998) also suggests that authentic participatory reform requires a differentiation between "participation as consumerism and participation as citizenship" (p. 584). He maintains that furthering the notion of participation as consumerism envisions a role for parents as consumers of a public good for the benefit of their particular children and is the rationale that often underlies the provision of school choice as a means to enhance parental participation in the education system. According to Peters this reduces public education to an "'enterprise culture'" which calls for "'remodeling institutions along commercial lines'" (as cited in Anderson, 1998 p.586).

The very existence of these networks leads one to assume that those who participated in them did not want to abandon participation as a reform strategy and adopt market-oriented reforms. If they had wanted market-oriented reforms it is unlikely that they would have volunteered the time and energy it took to create networks of school councils that enabled meaningful involvement. However, according to the respondents, very few parents were prepared to put in the time and energy required to effect the changes needed to enable authentic participation. For many parents, the provision of choice was more

appealing than struggling to create networks of school councils which enabled meaningful–as opposed to contrived–involvement. As one parent explained,

> The other dozen people that I have seen come and go over the years just don't want to do that old stuff and yet they don't, aren't willing to put in the time and energy it takes to effect change. They will either just say, "Ah we'll go to a charter school" or "We'll go to a private school" or "I care about my kid, I'll get a private tutor . . . " . . . their attitude is basically, "Well I've only got so much time and energy so I'll focus on my kid."

The specific intent of these networks was to transform the role that parents and school councils played in the public education system. These networks of school councils were intended to provide parents and school councils with genuine opportunities for authentic participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. According to Anderson (1998),

> Authentic participation moves beyond concerns with legitimacy and public relations to shared control. It conceives of participation as important for the development of the individual, important for the creation of democratic institutions, and important as a means to increase learning outcomes. Its definition of politics is broadened to include issues of equity as well as the more subtle, behind-the-scenes ways that power is exercised in educational systems. Finally, it defines democracy as participatory rather than merely representative and results in more active and informed citizens and institutions with greater moral authority. (p. 595)

Authentic Participation

In determining if, in actual practice, these networks of school councils were successful in enabling authentic participation it is first necessary to decide how to evaluate the authenticity of participation. Anderson (1998) has developed a conceptual framework to assist in examining the authenticity of participatory practices which was helpful in assessing the effectiveness of these networks in enabling authentic participation. This framework consists of a series of five interrelated questions: 1) Participation towards what end? 2) Who participates? 3) What are the relevant spheres of participation? 4) What conditions and processes must be present locally to make participation authentic (that is, the micropolitics of participation)? 5) What conditions and processes must be present at

broader institutional and societal levels to make participation authentic (that is, the macropolitics of participation)?

Participation toward what end? Anderson maintains that "authenticity depends on the explicitness of the ends-in-view and the extent to which a discourse of democratic participation is used merely for legitimating purposes" (p.588). One of the primary goals of these networks was to confront the superficiality and contrivance of the involvement afforded through participation in the original umbrella groups and to provide genuine and authentic opportunities for parents and school councils to have an equal and informed voice in deliberations about policies, priorities, programs, budgets and philosophies of the school jurisdiction. In other words, these networks were intended to provide parents and school councils with genuine and authentic opportunities to participate in the democratic decision making processes of the public education system.

According to the respondents, these networks of school councils did, in fact, empower the parents and school councils and did enlarge the scope of activities that were available to them to participate in. These networks, rather than simply disseminating information to the parents and the school councils, provided genuine opportunities for parents to talk to the professionals and trustees about educational matters, as opposed to talking about fundraising and bake sales. As well, these networks enabled the parents and school councils to have better access to information; to voice their concerns and ask questions directly of the trustees and administrators; to participate in the policy-making process; and to have two-way (as opposed to "top-down") communication with the board of trustees and central administration. In addition, the respondents reported that these networks validated the legitimacy of parental and school council involvement in the public education system and increased awareness throughout the jurisdiction of the possible ways parents and school councils could play a meaningful role–both at the school and jurisdictional level.

Barber (1998) maintains that opportunities for participation in the democratic decision-making processes should enhance the power of a community and enlarge their scope of activities (p.7). It appears that these networks were able to enhance the influence of the school councils and enlarge their scope of activities. However, the degree to which

they were able to do so varied between the two jurisdictions. The network enabled by policy was successful in providing genuine and authentic opportunities for all of the school councils in the jurisdiction to participate in the democratic decision-making processes of the board of trustees. This, in part, can be attributed to a culture which supported and encouraged authentic parental and school council participation at both the school and jurisdictional levels. In addition, not only did this jurisdiction have policy in place which enabled the network of school councils, it also had policy in place to guide the public consultation process that would be used in developing policies for the jurisdiction.

The networks which did not have policy in place to enable and legitimize their operation were not as successful in enabling authentic participation. The official route for school council participation continued to be the original school council umbrella group, which was not perceived to enable authentic participation. In addition, not all of the school councils in the jurisdiction participated in these networks. As a result, these grass-roots initiatives were only able to extend more authentic opportunities for participation to the parents and school councils within the bounded areas of the networks; and even then, the influence they had was limited. In one network, none of the eligible trustees attended the network meetings, and only one of a possible three trustees regularly attended the meetings in the other network. In addition, these networks did not have a formal role to play in providing advice to the board. However, because they were able to act collectively, the school councils which belonged to these grass-roots networks probably had more influence with the board of trustees and central administration than they would have had as individual school councils.

What was not clear in either of these jurisdictions is whether or not concertive control was a factor at the school level and influenced the positions taken by the school council representatives at the network of school council meetings. If the school council was in the practice of consulting widely with the broader school community, with respect to issues discussed at the network meetings, then it is likely that the views expressed by the school council representative(s) would reflect the views of the broader school community. However, if the school council did not consult the broader school community and if the principal had a great deal of influence over the school council, the school council

representative(s) was at risk of putting forward the principal's views as the school community's view at the network meetings. That is to say, it was at risk of self-identifying with the principal's views rather than developing a view that reflected the aims and desires of the broader school community, and then expressing the principal's view, rather than the school community's view, at the network meetings.

There was no way of monitoring whose views the school council representatives were bringing to the network meetings. However, one network specifically asked that more than one representative from each school council attend the network meetings in the hope that this would better enable a broader representation of views.

Who Participates? According to Anderson (1998), "the question of who participates will partly depend on the ends in view." Golarz and Golarz (1995) advise that, in a democratic society, all those who are affected by decisions should be provided opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes.

> The coordinated efforts of concerned citizens, educators, parents, and all other affected members of a community are needed to improve our schools. No one should be overlooked–not the bus driver, not the custodian, not the local business owners, and surely not the students. No longer can groups of people work in isolation, at cross purposes, or without the necessary understanding and support of those who are affected by their decisions. (p.29)

Golarz and Golarz also maintain that,

> Participatory governance aims to meaningfully involve all those people who are affected by decisions made relative to the educational structure in their community. By involving and empowering widening circles of representative individuals, communities can gain the power to shape the culture and the essence of local schools. (p.12)

Certainly, this was the intent of these networks, and because the membership in a school council is to include parents, teachers, students, and community representatives, in theory, it should be representative of all those who would be affected by decisions made at the jurisdictional level. However, as discussed above, this required the school council representatives who participated in the network to bring the collective view of the school community, and not their individual views, to the network meetings. This meant that the school council representative needed to have sufficient time to share information with the

other school council members and the school council needed to have sufficient time to consult broadly with the school community. Again, the extent to which these networks were able to do so varied.

The network enabled by policy attained a high degree of authenticity with respect to the criteria of who participates because board policy clearly spelled out the network's role. In addition, this board also had policy in place which spelled out how school councils would be involved in the consultation process used by the board to develop jurisdiction policy. According to the respondents, this policy stipulated that the board should allow a minimum of six weeks circulation time when seeking school council input into district policy. In the grass-roots initiatives, on the other hand, the school board was not required to consult with the school councils in the development of district policy, and often chose not to do so. While the school council legislation provides school councils the right to advise the board on any matter relating to the school, it appeared that the status quo in this jurisdiction questioned the legitimacy of this role. In addition, as mentioned above, this network only included some of the school councils in the jurisdiction, so it was not representative of all those who would be affected by a decision.

One area of concern in both of these networks, with regard to who participates, is the lack of participation by classroom teachers in the networks. Classroom teachers typically did not participate in either of these networks. When school based personnel attended, it was usually the principal or a vice-principal. Unless either the school principal or the school council representative brought the classroom teachers' perspective to the network meetings–their voice was absent. Presumably their views would be reflected in the school council deliberations, but because teachers tend not to be very active or very vocal in many school councils, and because it is questionable whether or not one teacher member of a school council can adequately represent all of the school's staff–it is doubtful that teachers' views were adequately represented at the network meetings. The network enabled by policy, did, however, have a representative of the Alberta Teachers' Association attend regularly. While he may not have adequately represented the classroom teachers' views he was at least able to represent teachers' views from the perspective of the provincial association.

What are the relevant spheres of participation? Golarz and Golarz (1995) advise that in participatory governance, "All of the issues surrounding the role of public education–issues that relate fundamentally and consistently to the purpose of education–must be addressed."(p.30). One of the key goals of these networks was to provide genuine opportunities to parents and school councils to advise and consult the board of trustees and central administration on matters of philosophies, policies, priorities, programs, and budgets with respect to the education of the children who attended public schools in the jurisdiction.

In the jurisdiction where the network was enabled by policy this occurred systematically and regularly–to the point where it became necessary to avoid information overload and ensure that the school councils were only consulted on issues that were relevant to them. In the jurisdiction where the networks were grass-roots initiatives, the extent to which this occurred was minimal. This network was able to provide advice and consult with the one trustee who regularly attended the meetings, but because they were not recognized as an "official" school council organization they did not have any formalized opportunity to provide advice to the entire board of trustees or to central administration. While this did not stop them from sending memos and letters to the board about their questions or concerns, the influence they had was limited because they were not recognized as a legitimate organization of school councils.

What conditions and processes must be present at the micro-political level? According to Knight-Abowitz (1997),

> Participatory reforms cannot be understood without understanding how participation is mediated by politics and culture, . . . politics and power are embedded in a school's culture, resulting in a form of cultural politics that makes successful implementation of participatory structures more complex than current research indicates. (as cited in Anderson,1998, p.593)

Certainly this was the experience of many of the respondents in this study. While these networks were intended to enable authentic participation of parents and school councils at the macro-political level, it was exceedingly difficult for the networks to succeed if they did not have the support at the micro-political level.

One network, which had considerable resistance from the principal of the school council who initiated the network, experienced considerable difficulty in getting the network established, in part, because they did not have the support they needed to organize and hold meetings and to communicate with other school councils at the micro-political level. In addition, the parents who initiated this network not only lacked the support of their school principal, they also lacked the support at the macro-political level. They did not have the support of their local trustee and there was no policy in place to legitimize the network. In the end this network only lasted a year.

In contrast, another grass-roots network in this jurisdiction did have assistance and support at the micro-political level. The principal of the school council which initiated the network encouraged the establishment of the network and was an active participant and advocate of the network. Several other principals followed suit and they, too, became active participants and supporters of this network. In addition, this network had the active support and encouragement of at least one of their trustees. Accordingly, even though this network did not have board policy to enable it, and apparently met with resistance from central administration and most of trustees, it is now into its fourth year of operation.

This example substantiates Anderson's (1998) claim that "there is much current evidence that courageous democratic leaders in schools and central offices can foster conditions in schools that open up space for authentic participation " (p.593). However, the micro-political conditions necessary for authentic participation are not only influenced by the professionals. Parents, too, must consider such participation a part of the parental role and worth their time and energy. As Anderson points out,

> The potential of participation is most fully realized when the commitments and energies of democratic leaders are directed in concert with courageous followers toward the elimination of the institutional and psychological barriers to authentic forms of democratic participation. (p.594)

The greatest challenge, at the micro-political level, in enabling authentic democratic participation, may well be engaging the parents. Even in the jurisdiction enabled by policy, where a commitment to authentic parental and school council participation was embedded throughout the jurisdiction, the network continually had to work at sustaining school

council participation in the network. This was primarily due to the high turn over rate in the membership of the school councils. At the beginning of each school year the network chair had to ensure that every school council was aware of the network and was invited to send a representative or representatives to attend the network meetings. In addition, they found they had more participation if they planned their agendas well ahead and communicated them early to the school councils. It was also helpful if the meetings were scheduled so they did not conflict with meetings of the board of trustees or individual school councils. Attendance was also better when they had an educational component to the evening. Parents were more likely to attend if they were provided with information about curriculum, learning styles or any other topics which would help them understand what their children were learning in school and how they could assist them to be more successful students.

In one instance parents who served on the school council did not want to devote much of their school council meeting time to discussions about issues that were raised at the network of school council meetings. According to the respondent, this was an unusual occurrence, and seemed to be related to one specific council–but it may well be a factor that has to be considered in implementing networks of school councils.

What conditions and processes must be present at the macro-political level?

Anderson (1998) advises that,

> While a deeper understanding of the micropolitics of participation is a necessary move toward more authentic forms of participation, we must not assume that educational institutions and systems will tolerate authentic spaces once they are created. (p.594)

The specific intent of both of these networks was to create an authentic space for parental and school council participation at the macro-political level in their respective school jurisdictions. To achieve the intended purpose, a number of conditions and processes had to be in place at the macro-political level. First, the networks had to be democratic. To this end, every school council in the bounded area of the network was eligible to participate in the network and accorded one vote in the organization.

Second, the school councils had to retain ownership of the network. In the network enabled by policy this was achieved by ensuring that school councils were actively involved

in developing the policy. The board even went so far as to agree to pass this policy without making any changes to it, once it had been approved by the network of school councils. In the grass-roots networks ownership by the school councils was assured because the networks were initiated, organized, and operated by the school councils independent of the board of trustees and central administration.

Third, in addition to retaining ownership of the networks, the school councils also needed to retain control of the network. This was achieved by ensuring that only the school councils had voting privileges and that the chairperson of the network was elected by the school councils. In addition to chairing the meetings, the network chairperson also needed to retain control of the agenda. However, the agenda was open to all of the network participants. Any network participant, whether a school council representative, a trustee, or someone from central administration could ask the chair of the network to have an item placed on the agenda.

As well, participation in these networks had to be voluntary and the membership in them had to be open and flexible. That is, each school council, and not the network, determined if it wanted to participate, how many representatives it wanted to have, and who those representatives would be. In one jurisdiction the superintendent and the chair of the board of trustees were expected to serve as a liaison with the network. Their obvious commitment and support of the networks helped to mitigate any macro-political barriers as well as any micro-political barriers that may have been present at the school level.

Furthermore, the networks had to be small enough in size to enable dialogue and the trustees and central administrators who participated in the network had to ensure that they did not dominate the meetings. It was essential that these networks were informal rather than formal and consensual rather than adversarial. This meant that the chair had to serve more as a facilitator of the discussion rather than as director or controller of the meeting. To this end, standard formalized meeting procedures, such as Robert's Rules of Order, were not used. Instead, the chairpersons focused on creating an environment that was conducive to dialogue and enabling the discussion.

The boundaries of the discussion had to be clear. These networks were not a forum for discussing personnel issues–this was clearly spelled out in both jurisdictions. As well,

participants clearly understood that private matters relating to specific individuals or students were not to be discussed.

To ensure that these networks enabled meaningful involvement (as opposed to superficial, contrived or inappropriate involvement) there also had to be a clear understanding, amongst all of the participants, about what these networks were *not* intended to do. These networks were clearly not intended to be fundraising organizations, because as one parent explained, "it becomes way too easy to shift you off as the fundraising group and then limit the opportunities to impact policy." As well, it was very clear that these networks were not intended to be another hierarchical bureaucratic organization with decision-making authority or which controlled or directed the school councils. Rather, they were simply intended to enable participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. Furthermore, they were not intended to replace the voice of the individual school councils. At times the network might decide to put forward a collective view, but the individual school councils were under no obligation to support it or agree with it. Finally, these networks were not intended to duplicate or replace the board of trustees–they were simply intended to enable authentic participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction.

To function effectively these networks needed some minimal financial resources to enable communication. Sometimes these were provided by central administration and sometimes by the individual school councils. Support for human resources from central administration varied. When the superintendent and board of trustees were supportive of authentic participation, support from central administration was perceived to be beneficial. When the board of trustees and the superintendent did not appear to be supportive of the networks, support from central office was perceived as a possible threat to authentic participation.

In summary, the extent to which these networks met Anderson's criteria for authentic participation varied: the network enabled by policy was considerably more successful at enabling authentic participation than were either of the grass-roots networks. At first glance it appears that this success can be attributed to the policy enabling the network of school councils. However, the reason for this jurisdiction's success goes far

beyond matters of policy. While all of the above conditions were necessary to enable the effective implementation of networks of school councils, they were not sufficient to mitigate either the micro-political or the macro-political forces that work against authentic participation. Clearly, unless a commitment to authentic public participation in the public education system was embedded throughout the jurisdiction and amongst the parents themselves, these networks could not, and did not, enable authentic participation.

While the provision of genuine opportunities for authentic participation, as described above, was absolutely essential for these networks to enable meaningful involvement it was not the only requirement for involvement that was perceived to be meaningful. In addition, the network participants also had to be well-informed.

An Informed Understanding

> As Jefferson recognized long ago, if citizens use their power indiscreetly, the remedy is not to take their power from them but to inform their discretion. The task for social democrats, then, is to educate democracy, to help persuade citizens that their interests lie not in dismantling government and liberating the commercial sector in the name of "free markets" but in putting democracy to work in the name of common goods. (Barber, 1998, p.40)

One of the goals of these networks was to provide parents and school councils with timely access to complete and understandable information. The respondents indicated that they could not participate in any meaningful way without an informed understanding of the issues. As Barber (1984) points out, "information is indispensable to the responsible exercise of citizenship and to the development of political judgment" (p.278). To acquire this enlightened understanding, all available relevant information had to be shared openly, willingly, widely, and in a timely manner throughout the jurisdiction.

There was considerable difference between the two jurisdictions in how openly information was shared. In the network enabled by policy the board of trustees and central office attempted to provide whatever information the school council representatives either wanted or needed to know. According to the respondents from this network, this jurisdiction clearly demonstrated a willingness and openness to share in anything the participants asked. The parents and other school council representatives were never made to

feel that they shouldn't be asking for information. The only thing the district reserved sharing information on was personnel issues and this was clearly stated in the board policy which enabled the network.

This jurisdiction even went so far as to release accommodation studies done by an outside consultant to the network of school councils–in draft form–so that they would have the same opportunity as the board of trustees and central administration to consider and respond to this information. They did so, according to one administrator, because "our relationship with them was if we saw this as something that was of interest to the system we would bring it to them." Barber (1998) maintains that when citizens are well-informed they can participate in the democratic decision-making process as effectively as their leaders.

In the jurisdiction where the networks were grass-roots initiatives it was much more difficult for the networks to access the relevant information. If their trustee was free to disclose the information, he would; however, the respondents indicated that information was not readily accessible. In contrast to the above example, it took this network over a year to get a copy of the accommodation studies done in this jurisdiction. Golarz and Golarz (1995) maintain that the reluctance to enable access to information is characteristic of most public institutions.

> We seem to possess a national mind-set that those who hold political power and/or perform their roles at the upper levels of bureaucracy are somehow mystically empowered to make wiser decisions. . . . The only edge that bureaucrats hold over the rest of the people is access to information. If all that is known at the upper levels of government or educational organizations were shared, then decisions at all levels would be made more wisely. In addition and most importantly, the directions chosen by those most affected would include ownership and commitment to making things happen. (p. 35)

While reluctance to share information with the public may be characteristic of most public institutions, it does not fit with these respondents' conception of meaningful involvement, nor does it fit with Dahl's criterion for a democratic process. According to Dahl (1993), enlightened understanding requires that "each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the

need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests" (p.57).

Achieving this ideal proved a difficult matter for these networks of school councils. As one parent explained,

> One of our frustrations was making the board and the administration realize that it didn't do any good to give us information at the last minute and expect a decent response; that they had to be more organized about getting information out to us sooner and recognizing that there was a process to follow . . . . But regardless of how the process worked, there had to be enough time in there to respond effectively. And while some chairs certainly felt comfortable giving their opinions about issues, we didn't want that to be the process. The process was to involve school councils and parents at the school level so that they could have an opportunity to voice their opinion of things–not just create another bureaucratic organization that would pretend or have the pretense of always representing their views. We didn't want to do that.

The important point here is that these networks of school councils were not intended to function along the lines of a traditional representative organization. Rather, their role was to enable informed participation by all members of the school community in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. This required a conception of the school council as a vehicle to involve the school community in the deliberations of the network.

Deliberative, Active and Effective Participation

> Participation entails constant activity, ceaseless willing, and endless interaction with other participants in quest of common grounds for common living. . . . while the election of representatives requires some periodic activity from citizens, it is a political act whose purpose is to terminate political action for all but the elected delegates. It achieves accountability by alienating responsibility, and leaves elected politicians as the only real citizens of the state. (Barber, 1998, p.12)

One of the key purposes of these networks of school councils was to provide the school councils with systematic, structured, and ongoing opportunities to participate in deliberations about policies, priorities, programs, budgets, and philosophies. One trustee

described this as a "bottom up" approach to democracy–rather than simply being a form of "top down" control.

> When governance is a top down imposition of rules, legislation has been created in a vacuum, rather than on the basis of the input that comes from the grass-roots. You have an entirely different democratic process occurring. And I don't even know if I can call it democratic.

Where the network was enabled by policy, the network played an active role in such deliberations. In this jurisdiction, the network was consulted by the board of trustees to help the board determine if a broad policy was necessary or if the issue was best dealt with at the school level. When it was agreed that a jurisdiction-wide policy was appropriate, this network, as well as the individual school councils, had the opportunity to be involved in developing such policies. This active participation in policy development was thought to result in policies that were more responsive and enabling. As one of the participants explained, "I think that it does allow parents to have that impact on very broad policy which in turn ends up determining what kind of places schools can be." In addition, this active participation in the deliberative processes fostered a sense of responsibility, ownership, and commitment amongst the parents and the school councils for the decisions made by the board of trustees and the actions taken by central administration. As Sarason (1995) points out, "'a democratic decision-making process results in broader support for decisions and an increased likelihood of effective implementation. Further, decisions are better when the people affected participate in making them'" (as cited in Beck, 1998, p.37).

Barber (1998) advises that "the trouble with representative institutions is that they often turn the act of sovereign authorization into an act of civic deauthorization" (p.98). Furthermore, he maintains that "citizens need fair and caring leaders, but such leadership ought to enhance their own activity rather than replace it" (p.103). Clearly, with the exception of one trustee, this was not the case in the grass-roots networks. In this jurisdiction, participation in the jurisdiction's democratic decision making processes remained the purview of the board of trustees. Only one trustee actively encouraged the parents and the school councils to play an active role in deliberations about educational matters. According to this trustee, this enabled him to better represent his constituents at the board table.

In addition to being deliberative, in order to be meaningful, participation could not simply be participation for participation's sake. Rather, the participation had to be worthwhile that is, it had to actively engage the school council representatives in ways that enabled them to be actively engaged in the public education system. These network participants wanted to be able to act in ways that would allow them to capitalize on their individual strengths and talents, to enhance and improve the public education system. One parent described meaningful involvement as participating in a way that made her feel like she had really "made a difference." According to Golarz and Golarz (1995), "participatory governance in education is another example of a natural response to what exists in the hearts of a growing number of people: the desire to share in the events and processes that affect their lives" (p.16).

It appears that these networks of school councils were, in effect, intended to enable participatory governance of the public education system. However, participatory governance is not typically how public education is governed in Alberta school jurisdictions. Typically, the public's participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction is primarily limited to voting for trustees at election time. However, as Barber (1998) points out,

> The equality with which voters enter the polling booth disappears into the ballot box along with their vote. Electoral activity reduces citizens to alienated spectators–at best, watchdogs with residual and wholly passive functions of securing the accountability of those to whom they have turned over their sovereignty. Under the representative system, leaders turn electors into followers; and the correct posture for followers is deference. Democracy becomes a system that defines how elites are chosen–in Joseph Schumpeter's classical definition, elective oligarchy, in which the subjugated public from time to time selects the elites who otherwise govern it. Democratic politics thus becomes a matter of what leaders do, something that citizens watch, rather than something they do. (p.98)

Those who initiated these networks of school councils were no longer satisfied simply serving as a deferential electorate, no longer satisfied with being the passive recipients of information, no longer content to simply serve as observers of the democratic decision-making process or to serve as its watchdog. Rather, they wanted ongoing opportunities to participate in the democratic decision making processes that would affect

their children's lives. It appears, then, that the intent of these networks of school councils was to make fundamental changes to the essential nature of representative democracy itself.

The Crucial Importance of Dialogue

> Thus it is that democracy, if it is to survive the shrinking of the world and the assaults of a hostile modernity, will have to rediscover its multiple voices and give to citizens once again the power to speak, to decide and to act; for in the end human freedom will be found not in caverns of private solitude, but in the noisy assemblies where women and men meet daily as citizens and discover in each other's talk the consolation of a common humanity. (Barber, 1984, p.311)

Consistently throughout the study the respondents indicated that the central purpose of these networks of school councils was to provide an opportunity for the network participants to talk to each other so that they could "share information" and "network." One respondent said that "sharing information" was the "whole purpose of the organization" and defined networking as "a frank discussion of things that are of current interest within the school system." Another respondent, who initiated a network, was motivated to do so after observing a successful network in operation because of the opportunity it provided for dialogue.

> So we went there and we were just blown away. . . . It was just so amazing to us to see principals, and teachers and parents sitting around a table and just discussing issues in a really positive way because that isn't something we'd seen in our school. So we thought wouldn't it be just wonderful to get our [Network of School Councils] up and running as well.

In effect, these networks created a public space for public dialogue about public education. According to the respondents a number of benefits accrued through the process of public dialogue. To begin with, it enabled the participants to acquire a broader view of the issues, or as one trustee put it, "it takes the school councils into the bigger picture, so it gets away from just my school and my world." As well, trustees could get a "balance of information" rather than just hearing from the "squeaky wheel" and this assisted them in their decision-making processes at the board table. This opportunity to hear a variety of different viewpoints often resulted in the network participants changing their minds about a particular issue. "I've seen a lot of people shift their thinking once they hear about the

problems, the difficulties, the issues that other schools have." The opportunity to talk informally and freely enabled the participants to develop a shared understanding of the issues, which, in turn, fostered mutual respect for each other's needs and differences which, in turn, engendered a sense of trust. As one parent explained,

> It's made me realize there are different ways to do things. It's made me realize that if enough people start talking to each other and start talking the same language you can effect change. It's made me realize that the problems I have as a school council chair or an active member in my school community are shared by many other people.

Barber (1984) attests to the power of public dialogue to enable a more empathetic view.

> Talk of every kind–cognitive, prudential, exploratory, conversational, and affective–can enhance empathy, and there is perhaps no stronger social bone and no more significant ally of public thinking than the one fashioned by empathy . . . . Empathy reaches consensus by affirming commonality and affection ("I am like others" and "I like others"). (p.188)

As Barber (1984) points out, the presence of empathy enhances democratic decision-making processes.

> Empathy has a politically miraculous power to enlarge perspectives and expand consciousness in a fashion that not so much accommodates as transcends private interests and the antagonisms they breed. . . . The leap out of privatism and self-interest that democratic participation promotes is a leap to embrace strangers whose commonality with us arises less out of blood or geography or culture than out of talk itself. (p.189)

In addition to enabling a more empathetic view amongst the network participants, the process of dialogue helped to foster a sense of community. One participant described participation in the network as a "means of binding us together;" while another described it as way for them to be more like a "community." As Teurfs and Gerard (1993) point out, these are common benefits of dialogue.

> One might think of Dialogue as a stream of meaning flowing among and through a group of people, out of which might emerge some new understanding, something creative. Dialogue moves beyond any one individual's understanding, to build collective understanding and meaning. It helps make explicit the implicit and can build and sustain community. (p.4)

In addition, the respondents indicated that another benefit of dialogue was that it enabled mutual learning about how to implement more effective school councils and about how to improve the education system. As one network chairperson pointed out "these are very bright people and they have some very good ideas on how things can be done within the system." One trustee advised that the process of dialogue enabled him to be more connected to his constituents and more open to their views. This, then, enabled him to be more creative and innovative in addressing situations, instead of being "boxed in by an established policy." As well it enabled him to be more proactive.

> I think we can be more proactive and I think that's where our governance approach is taking us. It says get out there and connect with your constituents and dialogue with them to find out what the issues are so that it's not a case of eleventh hour crisis. Instead, it's a case of being tuned in, being sensitive to the issues before they reach the point of being a crisis and you may well have other opportunities for looking at alternative solutions other than that which is presented to you at the eleventh hour.

According to Ellinor and Gerard (1998) dialogue is a "learning conversation" that opens the door to more collaborative, creative and productive personal relationships and enables "double-loop learning and more coherent decisions that can shift the very culture and operational patterns of the organization" (p.302).

Finally, the respondents indicated that, through the process of dialogue, they could get feedback from each other and this was perceived to be a valuable source of support. This kind of connectedness removed the sense of isolation that they sometimes felt in their individual school communities and, in doing so, fostered a sense of hope. In other words, the process of dialogue enabled the development of a social network amongst the various participants. Tonn and Petrich (1998) maintain that,

> To build a social network, dialogue is needed. Schneider (1996) states that "conversation is the foundation upon which all political behavior is built." To support his point, he quotes John Dewey, who wrote in 1959 (as quoted in Post, 1993) that "democracy begins with conversation;" Barber (1984) who states that "there can be no strong democratic legitimacy without on-going talk;" and Ackerman (1989) who agrees that "dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship." (p.88)

These networks of school councils served as a means to institutionalize talk, that is they served as a means to enable the various members of the school community to participate in a dialogue about public education. The process of dialogue enabled these citizens to think together and to act together for the purpose of enhancing and improving public education–not for the benefit of their individual children or their individual schools–but for their collective benefit. As one parent explained,

> It's been very interesting to me to hear other people's points of view that are not the same as my own . . . and to be able to open my mind enough to hear that my way isn't always the only way and that there are other issues out there, there are other problems at schools with different neighborhoods, different makeups. So, I think it's given me a broader picture than I had before.

According to Barber the role that dialogue plays in focusing attention on the common good is essential to the democratic process,

> Talk helps us to overcome narrow self-interest, but it plays an equally significant role in buttressing the autonomy of individual wills that is essential to democracy. It is through talk that we constantly re-encounter, re-evaluate, and re-possess the beliefs, principles, and maxims on the basis of which we exert our will in the political realm. . . . Talk is the principal mechanism by which we can re-test and thus re-possess our convictions, which means that a democracy that does not institutionalize talk will soon be without autonomous citizens, though men and women who call themselves citizens may from time to time deliberate, choose and vote. (Barber, 1984, p.190-191)

However, Barber (1998) also maintains that such opportunities are typically not available in representative democracies. "In representative societies, talk is vertically structured, leaders talk to citizens, though citizens rarely talk to or among one another. There is little lateral interaction" (p.107).

What is unique about these networks of school councils is that they broke the traditional mould of vertical top-down communication typical of bureaucratic hierarchies and enabled lateral interaction for both the citizens and the leaders; that is they enabled parents, professionals, and trustees to talk amongst themselves about educational matters which, in turn, fostered an empathetic appreciation of each other's point of view. As Barber points out, the presence of empathy is key to the sustenance and maintenance of public

institutions which are intended to serve the common good. An example, provided by one respondent, attests to the power of dialogue in fostering empathetic appreciation.

> The teacher reps talk to the parents at their school council and then when the parents are talking at our [network of school councils meeting], some of the parents can speak from a teacher's point of view. "I talked to [our teacher rep] . . . this is what I think the teachers would think." So that has to help us a lot because it strengthens the partnership between the parents and the teachers.

For these respondents, meaningful involvement appears to have fostered an understanding of public education as a means to serve not only my interests or your interests–but to serve the common good. One trustee talked about the critical importance of the process of dialogue in fostering a commitment to the common good and the need to create spaces for such dialogue throughout the public education system.

> There needs to be another kind of process all the way through that is more meaningful. It is not a case of Alberta Education controlling, or the board controlling, or a system wide group of school councils controlling, but a process that allows grass-roots issues to rise to the level to which they should and could be addressed in the best interest of the common good–meaning one and all. I don't mean just parents and students, I don't mean just teachers, I don't mean just boards, I don't mean just politicians, but every one. Our entire community, our entire society in this province has to benefit by processes that facilitate a culture that is progressive. Status quo just doesn't cut it. What can I say?

These networks of school councils provided the opportunities for this "other kind of process" to occur. This other kind of process closely resembles Green's criteria for a more truly democratic politics which he described as follows:

> At a minimum, it would be a politics that is hospitable to informal conflict resolution in place of formal rules of order . . .; rewards dialogue and discussion rather than one-way "communication"; deepens and broadens processes of representation, so that more people from early childhood on are involved in the direct action of representing and being represented; and as much as possible devolves rule-making powers, not of exclusion but of self-governance, to communities defined by and defining themselves through a project of joint action. (1993, p. 18).

The nature of involvement that was perceived or experienced as meaningful through participation in these networks of school councils speaks to the ideal of a more truly

democratic politics in the governance of public education. However, traditional conceptions of representative democracy do not aspire to this ideal. Accordingly, those who pursue more meaningful involvement in the public education system seek a fragile and tenuous ideal.

A Fragile and Tenuous Ideal

As I reflected on the uneasiness that lay just under the surface of the conversation during the interviews and as I thought about the nature of the involvement that the respondent's perceived or experienced as meaningful, I concluded that this uneasiness reflected a recognition by the respondents that their notion of "meaningful involvement" was antithetical to the traditional authoritative, bureaucratic, and hierarchical structures of the public education system. Quite clearly, the kind of involvement that was experienced and perceived to be meaningful by those who initiated and participated in these networks was not consistent with the traditional organizational culture of the public education system.

According to the respondents, meaningful involvement was impossible to attain and sustain unless a belief in public participation in public education was held by all those who had a stake in the success of the system. As one network chairperson explained, "You have to have all of the parties in the process buy into the process itself or I think you're doomed to failure." Tonn and Petrich (1998) advise that "mental models" of governance "must be shared by others, in the cultural sense, or else behaviors will be disjointed, disorganized, and/or inappropriate" (p.87). However, mental models of public education as a collaborative endeavor, which include parents and citizens as active participants in the democratic decision-making processes that take place throughout the system, are not commonly held in our society today. Rather, public education is typically thought of as an essentially professional undertaking organized as an authoritarian bureaucratic hierarchy.

To complicate things further, as Teurfs explains, "'we do not form strongly held beliefs and attitudes alone. Usually they were handed down to us through the culture'" (as cited in Weiler, 1994, p.9). It appears, then, unless we examine our cultural beliefs and assumptions together it will be extraordinarily hard to change the values and beliefs which

sustain our mental models of governance of the public education system. However, the opportunities and the skills needed to examine our cultural beliefs and assumptions together about the way we govern public education are lacking in western democratic societies. What is unique about these networks of school councils is that they did provide an opportunity for such an examination to occur by creating spaces for such conversations to occur.

Nevertheless, this study suggests that opportunity alone is not sufficient to enable the necessary changes in attitudes and beliefs about how public education should be governed. As Ellinor and Gerard (1998) point out, weaving the qualities of collaboration and partnership into traditional bureaucratic hierarchies and organizations requires more than opportunity. It also requires knowledge and skill. According to Ellinor and Gerard, attempts to weave collaboration and partnership into an organization "can seem like mixing water and oil. We do not know how to do it" (p.11). So instead of embracing the opportunity that school councils and networks of school councils present to weave collaboration and partnership into the traditional bureaucratic hierarchies of the public education system, this study suggests that the tendency is to think of them as yet another layer in the educational bureaucratic hierarchy and to conceive of them as representative hierarchical bureaucratic organizations.

However, the respondents in this study were very clear that these networks of school councils were not intended to become another layer in the bureaucratic organization of the jurisdiction, nor were they intended to be organized as a bureaucratic hierarchy.

> The process was to involve school councils and parents at the school level so that they could have an opportunity to voice their opinion on things–not just create another bureaucratic organization that would pretend or have the pretense of always representing their views. We didn't want to do that.

As Golarz and Golarz (1995) point out we simply add to the harm that is done to children and communities if we continue to create and implement representative hierarchical bureaucratic organizations.

> We cannot express too strongly our conviction–based on years of study, experience, and observation–that replacing the old bureaucratic structure with a new local one will fail to provide the authentic and broad participation required for long-lasting change and true improvement. We

> urge the communities of professional educators and concerned citizens to do all they can to correct this misguided trend and to make whatever efforts are necessary to prevent this approach from becoming part of their efforts to build a viable approach to reform. (p.6)

In addition to not knowing how to effectively weave the qualities of collaboration and partnership into our traditional bureaucracies, another barrier to change is that many of those who hold the power, authority and control in traditional bureaucratic hierarchies simply do not want to change or are threatened by the prospect of change. As Eisler (1995) points out, historically, when attempts are made to move from hierarchical authoritarian social structures to more collaborative partnership models they have been extremely vulnerable to attempts to co-opt the new partnership structures to maintain the old hierarchies of domination (p.460).

So, it seems that the traditional cultural attitudes and beliefs held about bureaucratic hierarchies and representative democracies, in combination with the lack of necessary skills, opportunities, and desire to weave the qualities of collaboration and partnership into the traditional bureaucratic hierarchies of the public education system, makes meaningful involvement a fragile and tenuous ideal.

This study suggests that these networks of school councils provide the opportunity to weave the qualities of collaboration and partnership into the traditional representative hierarchical bureaucracies of the public education system. However, this study also suggests that the mental models we collectively hold about the public education system serve as forceful barriers to the implementation of networks of school councils that actually enable meaningful involvement. Thus, it seems, that until such time as we have collectively shifted our thinking and collectively hold mental models of public education as a shared responsibility, meaningful involvement will remain a fragile and tenuous ideal.

Discussion

Emerging from the examination of the findings of this study, an analysis of the essential elements of "meaningful involvement," and an overview of the literature on participatory governance was the realization that the dissatisfaction and frustration that led

to the establishment of these networks of school councils stemmed, not from the original umbrella groups per se, but from the practice of representative democracy itself.

As I reflected on the role that these networks of school councils played and on the elements of involvement that were perceived or experienced as meaningful I concluded that the overall effect of these networks of school councils was to enable a "more hybrid system of governance" (Snauwaert, 1993). Snauwaert describes this as a participatory system of governance "wherein policy would emerge from the bottom up, informed and crafted by direct participation in a deliberative process. This process would in turn provide an opportunity for the development of informed educational participants" (p.104). This, it appears, was the intent of these networks of school councils, and in the jurisdiction where the network was enabled by policy, was in actual practice, the effect of this network.

Upon further reflection, I was struck by the similarities between the themes which emerged as the essential elements of meaningful involvement and Barber's conception of strong democracy.

> Strong democracy is defined by politics in the participatory mode: literally, it is self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens. Active citizens govern themselves directly here, not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is being deployed. Self-government is carried on through institutions designed to facilitate ongoing civic participation in agenda-setting, deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation (in the form of "common work"). Strong democracy does not place endless faith in the capacity of individuals to govern themselves, but it affirms with Machiavelli that the multitude will on the whole be as wise as or even wiser than princes and with Theodore Roosevelt that the majority of the plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than any, smaller body of men will make in trying to govern them. (1984, p.150)

Barber (1998) also maintains that the mental model that is most often held in traditional western democracies does not conceive of democracy as strong democracy, that is, as politics in the participatory mode, but conceives of democracy as thin democracy, that is, as politics in the representative mode. "We have become accustomed to thinking of politics as a spectator sport and of citizenship as a passive, watchdog function that is exercised only episodically in the election of those who actually govern in the name of

"'We the People'" (p.72). Accordingly, he asserts that in most western democracies, because they are representative democracies, most citizens are "passive, apathetic, inactive and generally uninterested in things public" and they have no "sense of themselves as citizens" (1984, p.228).

As I thought about these two different conceptions of democracy, it seemed to me that the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study suggest a conception of democracy as politics in the participatory mode, whereas, the original school council umbrella groups suggest a conception of democracy as politics in the representative mode. Thus it seems that "meaningful involvement" requires conditions and processes that enable politics in the participatory mode. Accordingly, this study suggests that meaningful involvement is not possible when the conditions and processes of the institution or organization reflect a conception of politics in the representative mode.

It appears that before meaningful involvement can become a reality for parents, community members, and students who serve on school councils, the governance structures of the public education system will have to be recreated to enable politics in the participatory mode. Traditionally, western democratic societies have governed under a system of representative democracy. Accordingly, the conditions and processes necessary for participation in the democratic decision-making processes are often missing from the political institutions, and the institutions that govern public education are no exception. Indeed, those who became frustrated and dissatisfied with the traditional school council umbrella groups certainly seemed to have perceived it this way.

It appears that those who initiated and participated in these networks of school councils were trying to put in place institutional innovations to enable politics in the participatory mode in the governance of public education. The need for such innovative structures was recognized by the Minister's Forum on School Councils. In their final report they recommend that "school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Council within their districts" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.16).

> 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. (1999, p.16)

Barber (1998) advises that the kinds of institutional innovations that are required to make this shift point toward the need "for an even more critical kind of innovation: a change in attitude" (p. 55). Certainly, this was the perception of those who participated in this study. Unless a belief in public participation in the public education system was shared by the professionals and the trustees as well as by the parents, community members, and students who served on school councils, involvement that was experienced or perceived to be meaningful, simply was not possible.

This need for a change in attitude was also recognized by the Minister's Forum on School Councils. They found that differences of opinion existed about the role that school councils should play between school council members who were principals and teachers and school council members who were parents, community representatives or students: "Parents and community representatives appeared to want more involvement than desired by principals and teachers in areas such as budgeting decisions, facilities use, student achievement, student discipline, staffing priorities and recruitment decisions, [and] programs offered"(Alberta Learning, 1999, p.10). They also found that differences of opinion existed between school boards and school councils about the nature of the involvement available to school councils: "School boards indicated school councils had a higher degree of involvement in education than councils themselves generally thought they did" (p.11). As well they found that school councils wanted to have more authentic opportunities for involvement in the decision-making processes:

> In addition to wanting more involvement in the areas cited in recommendation #2, [student achievement, budgeting, facility use, programs, policies]many participants at the public meetings indicated they did not believe their involvement in these areas had any real impact on the decisions which were made. For example, some participants indicated that they were shown proposed school budgets, but felt the actual opportunity for input had passed. (1999, p.16)

Thus it appears that this requirement for a change in attitude about the way we practice democracy in western democratic societies accounts for the tenuous and fragile

nature of meaningful involvement. This study suggests that, as long as we continue to characterize the governance of public education as politics in the representative mode, rather than as politics in the participatory mode, meaningful involvement will, indeed, remain a fragile and tenuous ideal. Golarz and Golarz (1995) advise that the move to participatory governance within the public education system is not an easy transition,

> Making educational decisions through participatory governance impacts all levels of a community. To move toward such a democratic and inclusive process brings some confusion, often resentment, and always resistance as the security of old ways of thinking and functioning are challenged and altered. To engage in this process of change, participants must be willing to learn through study and the observation of communities where such processes are demonstrating success. The process of participatory governance requires building high levels of trust where formerly there was little. It is a process that requires patience, persistence, and support at the highest levels of bureaucracy and a willingness on the part of all to take risks, share power, and be accountable. (p.12)

In conclusion, it appears that the networks of school councils which were the focus of this study were intended to serve as "institutional innovations" that would enable active citizen participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system. According to Mathews, this cultivates citizens who are committed to a common goal.

> Private individuals become citizens by making decisions about the issues that most concern them and affect their common well-being. Making common choices is work that, if done well–that is, with due deliberation–cultivates a sense of public responsibility. We feel more responsible for what we've participated in choosing than for what has been chosen for us. Choices also make public action possible; we can't work together until we decide what to work at. Most of all, making choices together identifies the shared or interconnected purposes that join people as a public.(1997, p.742)

This study suggests that participation in these networks fostered as sense of commitment amongst those who participated in these networks, towards the common goal of a public education system that educates all children and youth well. It appears that those who served on school councils and participated in these networks thought of themselves as public citizens who had a responsibility to contribute to the education of the children and youth who attended public schools within the jurisdiction.

Thus it seems that these networks provided the opportunity for the "common citizen" to contribute to the "common good" of those students served by the public education system. However, participation in these networks was limited to employees of the jurisdiction, trustees of the jurisdiction, and school council members from within the jurisdiction. Those citizens who were taxpayers and voters–but who did not serve in one of these roles–did not participate in these networks. In addition, classroom teachers did not usually participate in these networks of school councils. As a result, the voice of the classroom teacher was often absent in the deliberations of the network. Thus, these networks did not extend the opportunity for public participation in the governance of public education to all citizens and taxpayers. Accordingly, other mechanisms or approaches will also have to be provided–either as part of the networks or in addition to these networks of school councils– if we are to fully realize the goal of participatory governance of the public education system.

Concluding Comments

As we enter the third millennium, if there is one thing that public education needs, it is a public who feels a sense of responsibility and commitment towards it and who express a willingness to serve as citizens for its betterment. Yet, those who perceive themselves to be such citizens and wish to serve public education in this capacity have traditionally been relegated to the role of "handmaiden"–that is, deciding on white chocolate or dark, bingos or casinos–rather than being offered authentic opportunities to serve as citizens in deliberations about public education. This study offers hope that this is changing, as it provides an example of one jurisdiction which has made the shift from politics in the representative mode to politics in the participatory mode and provides another example of a jurisdiction that is caught in the throes of this shift. However, as Anderson (1998) points out, such occurrences within the public education arena are all too rare.

> At this juncture, we are seeing some disillusionment in participatory strategies and an openness to antipolitical solutions, such as parental school choice in quasi-markets. The choice before us seems to be whether to deepen our notions of participation toward stronger forms of democratic participation or abandon participation as a reform strategy. Given the tendency of reforms to cycle in and out of favor, it may be some time before

> a discourse of participation reappears on the scene (Cuban, 1990) and, by the time it does, public schools may be a thing of the past. For this reason, it is imperative to develop the conceptual tools to understand the way a discourse of participation either fails to result in empowered constituencies or ends up promoting nondemocratic ends. (p.595)

This study also serves as yet another warning for those who choose to ignore the critical need that public education has for an actively engaged, committed and supportive public. Those who are working to achieve meaningful involvement in the public education system, but who are dissatisfied and frustrated with their attempts to do so, (as was the case with some of the respondents in this study) will not persist for long. They will soon tire and lose hope, as effecting change can be a tireless and thankless undertaking. They will join the ranks of parents who either move their children to private or charter schools or who focus their efforts on their individual children rather than on the common needs of all of society's children. In doing so they will join the ranks of parents who have simply given up hope of having any meaningful role to play and begin to count the number of years before their youngest child graduates and they no longer have to contend with the public education system. When they do, once again the responsibility for public education will fall upon the teachers, and, as they so passionately pointed out in *Trying to Teach* (Alberta Teachers' Association, 1993), they can no longer do this job alone.

If the public education system is serious about "Fostering Educated and Active Citizens" (Osborne, 1999) then we will have to recognize that, while this work begins in our classrooms and in our public schools, it must also continue upon graduation. In order to do so, the public education system will have to make room for educated and active citizen participation in its democratic decision-making processes. What is the point of fostering educated and active citizens if our public institutions, such as public schools and public school boards, do not seek out, welcome and support active citizen participation once our public schools have inspired this ideal? As McKnight (1999) so clearly points out, this approach leads to disaffected and apathetic citizens.

> As we think about ourselves, our community, our institutions, many of us recognize that we have been degraded because our roles as citizens and our communities have been traded in for the right to clienthood and consumer status. Many of us have come to recognize that as we exiled our fallible neighbors to the control of managers, therapists, and technicians we lost

> much power to be the vital center of society. We forgot about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work and, instead, made some of us into the objects of good works–servants of those who serve.
>
> As we think about our community life, we recognize that something has happened to many of us as institutions have grown in power; we have become too impotent to be called real citizens and too disconnected to be effective members of community. (p.9)

This study offers some insight into the nature of involvement that could enable us to be called real citizens and to connect us together again so that all members of the school community have genuine and authentic opportunities to serve as informed, deliberative, active, and effective participants in a public education system committed to the common goal of educating all children and youth well. This study also offers some insights about the ways networks of school councils could enable this kind of meaningful involvement. This study suggests that public education will have to be reconceptualized as a shared responsibility rather than as an essentially professional undertaking, and the governance of public education will have to be reconceptualized as governance in the participatory mode, rather than as governance in the representative mode, to realize this tenuous and fragile ideal.

On the surface, it seems obvious that a strong system of public education requires an engaged and committed public. Furthermore, it seems obvious that, if given the choice, people would embrace any opportunity that presented itself to further the commitment of the public towards the public education system. However, the research to date has shown that, in actual practice, authentic participation and meaningful involvement are rare occurrences in the public education arena. This study shows that even though rare, it is possible, if a commitment towards public participation in public education becomes embedded throughout the jurisdiction. This study also shows how enormously frustrating it can be for those who are trying to further authentic participation and meaningful involvement, in the absence of such a commitment.

For the sake of educating all children well, we can only hope that we will acquire a better understanding of how to make the shift from politics in the representative mode to politics in the participatory mode before we have gone so far with our marketization and

privatization reform efforts, that there is no turning back. If we fail to do so, public schools may simply become another consumer service embedded in a market economy. Equitable opportunity for the success of all children as learners, if it ever existed, will become a thing of the past. In the words of one respondent:

> The question must be asked: How can you make decisions without involving those affected, in a collaborative process? We are sitting on the sidelines watching the democratic process occur without our participation. If schools and boards do not put in good democratic processes to involve school councils and communities, the only other option for parents and students is choice–a movement to the market model of education–and parents will exercise it. . . . it is my firm belief that if a strong and vital public education system is to continue to exist, we must begin talking to one another, respecting one another, listening to one another, walking with one another.

This study suggests that networks of school councils which enable authentic, enlightened, deliberative, active, and effective citizen participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system and which provide systematic and structured opportunities for public dialogue about public education may serve as one means to enable us to make this shift.

Recommendations

- Recommendation 1: Mandate Councils of School Councils.

  The Minister's Forums on School Councils M. L. A. Working Group recommended "that school boards be encouraged to establish Councils of School Councils within their districts" (Alberta Learning, 1999, p.4). While this is a step in the right direction it is doubtful that it will bring about the necessary changes to enable *authentic* participation by school councils in the governance of the public education system. There is much evidence to show that participatory reforms frequently fail to enable authentic participation. Furthermore, the M. L. A. Working Group reported that a difference of opinion exists between school boards and school councils about the nature of involvement accorded school councils: school boards reported that school councils had more involvement than school councils reported (p.11). Therefore, it is questionable if simply "encouraging" school boards to establish Councils of School Councils will be

sufficient to enable authentic participation of parents and other members of the school council in the public education system.

It may well be that the Government of Alberta will have to do more than simply "encourage" school boards to move in this direction. It may well be that the same approach which was taken to implement school councils will also have to be taken to implement networks of school councils. That is, Councils of School Councils will have to be mandated before school boards will take them seriously. Accordingly, the Government of Alberta should not simply encourage school boards to establish Councils of School Councils rather, they should *require* them to hold establishment meetings for Councils of School Councils in the same way that they required school principals to hold annual establishment meetings for school councils until a school council had been established for each school. Therefore, the Government of Alberta should:

1. Require school boards to hold an annual establishment meeting for a Council(s) of School Councils until a Council(s) of School Councils has been established for each school jurisdiction. The Council(s) of School Councils would serve as a means to enable school councils to :
    a) provide advice to the school board on board philosophies, policies, plans, programs, priorities, and budgets;
    b) share information and discuss educational matters with other school councils in the jurisdiction;
    c) enhance communication amongst the school councils, the superintendent; the school board, and the community;
    d) provide an opportunity for school councils to collectively provide advice to the school board and the Government of Alberta.

2. Implement legislation and regulations to guide the operation and functioning of the Councils of School Councils and to enable authentic participation of the school councils who participate in these organizations. Accordingly, such regulations should stipulate that:

i) each school board shall consult with the school councils in their jurisdiction to develop a policy that enables the implementation of a Council(s) of School Councils that is agreed to by a majority of the school councils in the jurisdiction;

ii) each school council may be represented on the Council of School Councils if it so chooses;

iii) each Superintendent and chair of the Board of Trustees or designate(s) shall serve as liaison to the Council of School Councils;

iv) each school council designate shall be a voting member of the Council of School Councils and members of the Board of Trustees and the Superintendent or designate(s) shall be non-voting members of the Council of School Councils;

v) each network will hold an organizational meeting no later than 60 days after the start of the school year;

vi) the membership of the Council of School Councils shall choose a chair and other officers desired from among the voting members;

vii) the school councils, the board of trustees, and administration may forward items for inclusion on meeting agendas to the chair who shall establish meeting agendas and shall chair the meetings;

viii) each network shall be small enough in size to enable democratic dialogue and deliberation by the network members, thirty school councils shall be the maximum number of school councils who participate in a Council of School Councils;

ix) each network will stipulate a minimum time frame that will enable the school council representatives, who participate in the network, to adequately consult with their school councils and school communities before providing input or feedback to the board of trustees;

x) each school board shall provide all available relevant information (with the exception of personnel and private student records and in accordance with FOIPP) in a timely manner upon the request of the Council of

School Councils or one of their designated school council representatives;

xi) each school board shall provide the necessary financial resources to enable the Councils of School Councils to function, including resources for professional development for those who participate in the network.

- Recommendation 2: Implement School Councils and Councils of School Councils as vehicles for participation and collaboration.

School councils and Councils of School Councils offer the most hope for school improvement and a more truly democratic politics when they are viewed as neither advisory nor decision-making, but instead, are viewed as vehicles to weave participation, collaboration, and partnership into the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system. If we are to further involvement in the public education system that is in any way meaningful it is necessary to put an end to the academic and political debates, which are ongoing, about whether or not school councils should be advisory or decision-making. Instead, we should focus on the possibilities they hold for enabling participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system. Accordingly, the Government of Alberta, in partnership with school boards, should:

1. Provide school councils and Councils of School Councils with the necessary resources and support to enable them to be implemented as vehicles for collaboration and participation in the democratic decision-making processes of the public education system.

2. Avoid implementing school councils and Councils of School Councils as another layer in the education bureaucracy and avoid implementing them as a bureaucratic hierarchy. To this end it is critical to heed Golarz and Golarz's (1995) warning that:

> Neither the effective schools research nor the IDEA process model supports the notion of creating new local school bureaucracies. In fact, the creation of such entities would be

> contrary to all of the tested and proven research. Participatory governance teams can only find their legitimate functioning if their efforts enhance true and extensive involvement and ownership. Those involved in this process of change must see their primary charge as one of promoting greater autonomy and involvement in the decision-making process. Those who initiate change by creating new local bureaucracies that only involve a few people simply add to the harm that is done to children and communities. (pp. 3-4)

3. Provide leadership training programs through universities, district inservicing, and the regional consortia which focus on helping prospective and current principals, trustees, school council chairpersons, and Council of School Councils chairpersons to acquire the necessary skills needed to further authentic participation and meaningful involvement in the public education system. Organizations such as the *International Association for Public Participation, The Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs,* and *Alberta Community Development* could serve as valuable resources in the development of such programs.

- Recommendation 3: Require School Boards to have "public participation policies."

The legitimacy of school boards has seriously been called into question during this past decade. Attempts by boards to further meaningful involvement in their democratic decision-making processes could restore that legitimacy. In addition to mandating "Councils of School Councils" the Government of Alberta should require school boards to implement policy that specifies how it will enable all citizens in the constituency to be involved in the democratic decision-making processes of the jurisdiction. Such policy should uphold the *International Association for Public Participation's Core Values For Public Participation:*

a) The public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives.
b) Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

c) The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the process needs of all participants.
d) The public participation process actively seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.
e) The public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate.
f) The public participation process provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
g) The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

- Recommendation 4: Implement education reforms that promote democratic ends.

In an attempt to reform Alberta's public education system, considerable emphasis is now being placed on the extension of school choice, increased support for private schools, and the importance of achievement tests to monitor the effectiveness of the public education system. Such reforms reflect a conception of parents and children as clients or consumers and a conception of public education as a consumer good or service. This is occurring regardless of a substantive body of research which shows that participatory reforms which reflect a conception of parents and students as partners, and schools as communities, hold the most promise for enhancing student success. Accordingly, the Government of Alberta should allocate more resources towards implementing, supporting, and evaluating participatory reforms such as school councils, Councils of School Councils and partnerships between families, schools and communities. Centres, such as the proposed Centre for School-Family-Community Partnerships in Learning at the University of Alberta, could assist in the implementation and evaluation of such participatory reforms and should be supported, not only by all those who ideologically would prefer the implementation of educational reform that seeks democratic ends, but also by all those who wish to enhance student success and foster school improvement.

- Recommendation 5: Model participatory governance.

  Public schools are the basis upon which our forebearers sought to ensure the continuation of a strong democratic society. Democracy is an evolving concept and the role that public education has to play in furthering this evolution, both in our schools and in our communities, should not be underestimated. Currently, the mental governance models that most members of western democratic societies hold, typically reflect an understanding of democracy as representative. It is unlikely that we can make a collective shift from representative to participatory mental models of governance simply because some one tells us we should. To make this transition, people will need to experience participatory democracy before they can adequately assess it effectiveness or appreciate its benefits. Educational organizations such as the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta School Boards' Association, and the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, to name a few, should ensure that their organizational governance structures provide genuine opportunities for authentic participation, by their membership, in their democratic decision-making processes. In doing so, they would model participatory democratic decision-making processes for schools, school boards and school councils throughout Alberta. If Alberta's public education system is to make the transition from hierarchy and control to participation and collaboration, it will require a collective shift in everyone's thinking–teachers, parents, principals, students, other staff, trustees, bureaucrats, politicians and members of the school community at large. Models of participatory governance could facilitate this shift in thinking.

- Recommendation 6: Further study is needed:
  1. To better understand how to enable authentic participation and meaningful involvement in the public education system through participation in school councils and networks of school councils.

  2. To better understand how to effectively implement school councils and networks of school councils which integrate participation, collaboration, and partnership into the traditional bureaucratic hierarchies of the public education

system. In particular, it is necessary to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by school principals, teachers, school council chairpersons, superintendents, system administrators, and school trustees to enable broad citizen participation in deliberations about public education.

3. To better understand how to extend opportunities for authentic participation and meaningful involvement in the public education system to *all* citizens–not just those who participate in school councils and networks of school councils as described in this study.

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APPENDIX A: SECTION 17 OF THE SCHOOL ACT

School Councils

17 (1) A school council shall be established in accordance with the regulations for each school operated by a board.

(2) The majority of the members of a school council shall be parents of students enrolled in the school board.

(3) A board of a separate school district or a division made up only of separate school districts, by resolution, may require that the parents of students enrolled in a school operated by the board who are members of the school council must also be of the same faith as those who established the separate school districts, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic.

(4) A school council may, at its discretion,

(a) advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school,

(b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board in accordance with the delegation

(c) consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister,

(d) consult with the principals so that the principals may ensure that the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent, and

(e) do anything it is authorized under the regulations to do.

(5) Subject to the regulations, a school council may develop and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its functions.

(6) A school council may make by-laws governing its meetings and the conduct of its affairs.

(7) Subject to the regulations, a board may develop and implement policies respecting school councils.

(7.1) A board shall establish an appeal process or conflict resolution procedure under which the principal or the school council may apply respecting disputes on policies proposed or adopted for a school.

(8) The Minister, on the request of the board, may dissolve a school council without notice at any time if the Minister is of the opinion that the school council is not carrying out its responsibilities in accordance with the **ACT** and the regulations.

(9) The Minister may make regulation

(a) respecting the election or appointment of the members of a school council and the term or other conditions of election or appointment and the dissolution of a school council;

(b) respecting the roles of the principals and the school council of a school and their respective powers, duties and responsibilities;

(c) respecting any other matter the Minister considers necessary respecting school councils;

(d) exempting a school or a class of schools from the application of this section.

Powers of Boards

44(1) A board must

(b) in respect of its operations

(i) keep in force a policy or policies of insurance,

(ii) with the approval of the Minister, participate in an arrangement under Par 15 of the *insurance Act,* or

(iii) with the approval of the Minister, participate in an alternative arrangement acceptable to the Minister,

for the purpose of indemnifying the board and its employees and school councils in respect of claims for

(iv) damages for death or personal injury,

(v) damages to property, and

(vi) damages to property owned by the board in respect of which the board has an insurable interest

(A) that the board has agreed to insure, or

(B) for which the board otherwise has or may have assumed liability, in an amount and form prescribed by the Minister;

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. First, I'd be interested in knowing what your role is in the network of school councils?
2. Tell me about the network of school councils: What led to its development? What purpose does it serve? Who attends the meetings? How are they chosen? When do you meet? Where do you meet? How often do you meet? Who sets the agendas for the meetings? How is that determined? What happens after the meetings? Who has the responsibility for conducting the affairs of the network?
3. Generally speaking, has participation in the school council network had any effect on your school council? on your school? on your school district? on you? on others? Please elaborate.
4. In your opinion, has participation in the school council network been beneficial, in any way, for you, for your school council, for your school, for your school district, for others? Please elaborate.
5. In your opinion, has participation in the school council network enabled your school council / school / school district to meaningfully involve parents and members of the school community in the education of the children through participation on school councils? Please elaborate.
6. In your opinion, has participation in the school council network enabled you to be meaningfully involved in the education of the children? Please elaborate.
7. Generally speaking, do you have any concerns about the network of school councils? Please elaborate.
8. In your opinion, do you think participation in the network of school councils has been detrimental in any way, for you, for your school council, for your school, for your district, for others? Please elaborate.
9. Form your experience, what features or characteristics, if any, of the network of school councils, enables it to fulfill its role effectively? Please elaborate.
10. From your experience, what features or characteristics, if any, of the network of school councils make it difficult for it to fulfill its role effectively? Please elaborate.
11. If you had the opportunity to change anything you wanted about the school council network what would you change? Please elaborate.
12. Are there any additional comments you would like to make about the network of school councils?

Thank you.

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Dear Study Participant:

My name is Lynn Odynski, I am a graduate student in the Master of Educational Administration Program in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. As part of the master's degree requirements I am conducting research on the development of school council networks and the perceived effects of participation in such networks. I believe that such information can be of assistance to others who may be interested in school councils.

Specifically, I seek responses to the following questions:

1. Does participation in a network of school councils build collective understanding and meaning, among the various participants, as to the role of the school council in facilitating meaningful involvement by parents and members of the school community in the education of children?

2. Does participation in a network of school councils facilitate the development of school councils which have the capacity to further meaningful involvement by parents and members of the school community in the education of children?

3. Does participation in a network of school councils further the meaningful involvement of parents and members of a school community in the education of children?

4. What other effects, if any, result from participation in a network of school councils?

To conduct this research, I plan to interview a number of individuals from two different school jurisdictions, who participate in school council networks. I am seeking your permission to interview you for this study.

The interview will require about one hour to complete. The interview will be tape recorded to reduce some possible sources of error in my data collection. The interview will be transcribed and the transcripts from the interview will be returned to you to review, comment on, or revise in order to ensure that the information obtained in the interview accurately reflects your views. You will also be provided with a copy of the initial data analysis in order to ensure that my interpretation of the data accurately reflects your views.

The information you provide to me will be confidential. The consent forms, audiotapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure place. The tape and the transcript will be identified by a code known only to myself. Your name will not appear on the tape of this interview, on the transcript of this interview, or in the written report of this study. I plan to use pseudonyms in the transcript and in the written report of this study. I will not identify you, the school, the school council, the network, or the school district in this

study. I will conduct the interviews myself and no one else will know how you - or anyone else - answered the interview questions.

If you decide that you no longer wish to participate in this study you may withdraw from the study at any time. In other words, even after the completion of the interview, if you decide that you do not want this information used in the study, and advise me of your decision prior to the completion of the study, I will not use it and the transcript and the tape will be returned to you.

This research complies with the University Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants and has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Educational Policy Studies. It also complies with the Cooperative Activities Program Agreement and has been approved by the Office of the Dean of the Faulty of Education. My advisor for this study is Dr. Margaret Haughey.

If you have any other questions or comments regarding your participation this study please do not hesitate to contact either myself, or my advisor, Dr. Margaret Haughey as follows:

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If you wish, I would be happy to share the findings of the final study with you.

To indicate that you understand the nature of this study and your participation in it will you kindly sign the consent to participate below:

Consent to Participate

I have read the above and have discussed my participation in this study with the researcher, Lynn Odynski. I understand the nature of my participation in this study and give consent to Lynn Odynski to tape record this interview, to have this interview transcribed by a third party, and to include the information obtained from this interview in the written report of her study.

Date: _____

Name of Study Participant: _____

Signature of Study Participant: _____