



Summary of Feedback
From Focus Groups on
School Advisory Councils

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Feedback from Focus Groups on School Advisory Council
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
June 2018

ISBN: 978-1-55457-857-3

Introduction

The Nova Scotia government is working with its partners to explore and define the role of School Advisory Councils (SACs) under the new *Education Act*, which came into effect on April 1, 2018. This will entail amending regulations to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of SACs. As part of this work, department staff have reviewed other jurisdictions, examined relevant research, considered previous feedback gathered from SACs, and conducted a series of focus groups with selected principals and SAC Chairs from each region across Nova Scotia.

This document provides the background for the focus groups with SACs, as well as a summary of the key themes brought forward by participants. Where appropriate, findings from research and other jurisdictions are included.

Summary

Focus groups were held in each regional centre for education and with the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP). Participants at each focus group brought forward very similar issues, concerns, and suggestions related to the role of SACs. The major themes raised by participants were:

Enhanced Role vs Focused Role

Participants did not want to see the responsibilities of SACs greatly increased. They suggested that SACs could augment their focus on school improvement both in terms of supporting student achievement and leading actions to improve and foster a positive school climate.

Participants felt that the duties and responsibilities of SACs could be more clearly defined. Some participants felt that the lack of clarity or understanding of the role of SACs contributed to low parental involvement and difficulty recruiting members.

Participants noted that there were some responsibilities that currently fell to SACs that they did not believe should continue. These included participating on the hiring panel for new principals and involvement in student discipline. Participants also noted that their duties need to be separate from the professional responsibilities of teachers and other school staff.

Participants felt that SACs should play a more active role in consulting with regional centres/CSAP and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) when new policies are being developed. Participants noted that genuine consultation would likely help increase interest and participation in SACs, as parents would see how they could add value to the education system. Participants felt that it was important that, when regional centres/CSAP and EECD seek feedback on policies from SACs, they complete the feedback loop by providing information back to the SACs on how their feedback was used to inform policy development.

Greater Communication

Participants expressed a desire for increased two-way communication between SACs, school communities, regional centres/CSAP, and the EECD. Participants wanted more information to come to the SAC regarding programs and initiatives both at the local (regional/board) and provincial levels. They felt that this would give them a better sense of what was happening in the broader education system. Participants also acknowledged that SACs could do a better job communicating out to parents and the school community about their activities.

Flexible Composition

Participants stressed the need for greater flexibility with respect to the composition of SACs. Participants agreed guidelines should be in place with respect to membership, and that certain seats should be required (e.g., principal, teacher, parent), but that flexibility is needed to allow SACs to recruit and retain members. This will also allow SACs to establish a composition that best meets the needs of their school community.

Networking and Collaborative Opportunities

Participants felt that there could be a benefit to having family of schools, regional, and provincial SAC meetings. This would allow SAC members to stay informed and learn about new initiatives in education, and could provide a venue for regions and/or EECD to gather feedback from SAC members on potential changes to policies or programs.

Support and Professional Development for SACs

Participants felt that there were opportunities to provide more training with respect to the roles and responsibilities of SACs. They also felt that it would be beneficial to offer some professional development to SACs to help them better understand new initiatives in education and issues affecting students and the school community (e.g. mental health).

Participants felt that some funding could help support the operations of SACs (e.g., by providing transportation and/or childcare options to facilitate increased parental involvement). Participants also felt that funding could be useful in supporting work related to school improvement.

Impact of Changes to SACs

Participants expressed degrees of anxiety around the potential new role of SACs. They agreed that any changes to the role of SACs should be communicated in a timely manner.

Context

Dr. Avis Glaze released her report, *Raise the Bar: A Coherent and Responsive Education Administrative System for Nova Scotia*, on January 23, 2018. In this report, there was a recommendation to enhance local, community voice through a refocused role for SACs.

On January 24, 2018, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development announced that Government accepted the spirit and intent of the recommendations.

In early February 2018, the Minister toured the province and met with representatives of school board staff, principals, teachers, and SAC members. Through these meetings, the Minister engaged in conversations about Dr. Glaze's report and recommendations. While discussions during these meetings covered a wide range of areas and allowed participants to express their ideas, thoughts, and concerns, one of the areas of focus was the reimaged role of SACs under the new education system.

On March 1, 2018, the Minister introduced the *Education Reform Act* into the legislature, which included a new *Education Act* (Schedule A) that came into effect on April 1, 2018.

Focus Groups with SACs

Building on the Minister's meetings, department staff engaged in a series of focus groups with representative SAC Chairs and principals from across the province. These meetings focused on gathering feedback regarding what members of SACs see as their most important duties and responsibilities, both now and moving forward.

Through these focus groups, EECD sought feedback on what supports should be in place to assist SACs, what the membership of enhanced SACs could look like, and how best to ensure a robust channel of communication between the SACs, regional centres for education/CSAP, and the department.

The focus groups were conducted as informal roundtables and were facilitated by department staff. Please see Appendix 1 for a list of guiding questions used in the focus groups.

In addition to the focus groups, EECD staff met with the Principals Forum on May 4, 2018, to gather their input, thoughts, and concerns regarding the reimagined role of SACs.

Major Themes

There was a great deal of consistency with respect to the feedback and themes raised by participants in each focus group across the province. The major themes shared by focus group participants are outlined below.

Roles and Responsibilities

Participants expressed some concern about the SACs having an enhanced role through increased responsibilities. SAC representatives who participated in the focus groups stressed that being a member of an SAC is a volunteer role, held by parents and community members that have multiple other responsibilities. There was a concern expressed that additional responsibilities for SACs may contribute to the challenge of recruiting/retaining SAC members. Participants suggested that SACs could be enhanced, not by taking on more responsibilities, but by focusing more on school improvement both in terms of supporting student achievement and leading actions to improve and foster a positive school climate.

Clearly defined roles

Participants expressed a desire for more clearly defined roles and expectations for SACs. Some participants felt unsure about what issues are within an SAC's power to address. This lack of clarity in role and function was cited numerous times as a contributor to low parental involvement and difficulty recruiting. Participants felt that having more clearly defined roles and responsibilities could help increase participation as parents would have a better understanding of the issues dealt with by the SAC.

LITERATURE SCAN

The literature scan revealed that the development of a unified SAC identity or the formation of subcommittees with a specific mandate/identity can give members a sense of confidence, clarity, trust, or purpose. Stelmach (2016) described how a SAC defined itself as a policy-oriented body and that it was deemed more successful than other SACs where members admitted that they were not sure what purpose they served. Overall, Stelmach found that without defined roles, SACs in Canada often revert to parent fundraising groups.

Participants also noted that the structure of SACs could be seen as formal and intimidating to new members or to individuals who might not understand bylaws or formal meeting procedures. Many participants noted that these elements of SACs were important, but that they could be addressed in a less formal way to help make meetings more inviting and less intimidating.

Participants in several focus groups noted the interaction between the SAC and the Home and School Association. This interaction includes both the membership and the function of the organizations within the school. This was particularly prevalent in the Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education, where these two groups have been merged at many schools. Participants noted that a clear understanding of what was within the mandate of an SAC, and what was not, would help SAC members better understand their roles and responsibilities as distinct from other organizations like home and school associations, specifically as distinct from a fundraising role.

Specific duties

Participants shared feedback on several specific areas related to their current role:

School improvement planning – participants shared that they are not as directly involved with student improvement planning as they had previously been because the nature of school improvement planning has changed. Members noted that they would appreciate continuing to get updates on school improvement planning and noted that SACs could have a role in advancing school improvement goals, particularly related to school climate and student well-being.

School specific issues – participants noted that SAC participation when specific issues arise with the school building is valuable. For example, a major renovation project or a potential school closure. SAC members felt they were a valuable conduit between the school community and those making decisions. Some participants felt that SACs should not be involved in the school review process, particularly in cases where their school is not being considered for closure but another school in the larger family of schools is.

Professional duties – a number of participants noted that while SACs should provide advice and feedback to the principal, SAC members are not necessarily experts in education and, therefore, should not advise on the specifics of teaching or educational planning. As one participant said, “You wouldn’t go into an ER and tell the nurses what to do, so why would you go into a school and tell the teachers what to do.”

Staffing decisions – participants at multiple sessions felt that it was not appropriate for a member or members of the SAC to participate on the hiring panel for a new principal. Some participants noted that the SAC could be consulted in advance of interviews being conducted to give the interview panel some indication as to the qualities or characteristics that the SAC feels would be important in a principal. In a couple of sessions, a participant noted that they felt an SAC member should participate on the hiring panel for a new principal given the principal's role with the SAC.

Student discipline – participants did not feel that it was appropriate for the SAC to play a role in matters involving student discipline. Participants explained that SAC members are also community members and the close relationship of SAC members to students, parents, and staff could lead to a conflict of interest with respect to matters of discipline.

Policy Decisions

Many participants felt that SACs could play a more active role in consulting when new regional and provincial policies are being developed. Participants noted that consultation must be genuine and that in the past members have felt like consultation happened when decisions were already made and that their opinions were not taken into consideration.

Participants suggested a number of ways that SACs could participate in this process, including sending documents for review and input and holding focus groups with SAC members. If documents were to be sent to SACs, participants noted that adequate time should be given to allow SACs to review and discuss

the documents during one of their regular meetings. Participants noted that when SACs provide input on a policy or initiative, they do not always know how or if their input is used. They agreed that there needs to be a better feedback loop to SACs so that they understand how the information they provide is helping to inform decisions at the regional and provincial level.

Given that SACs are volunteers and there are typically a number of demands on their time, it was suggested that if focus groups were to be scheduled with SACs, members should be canvassed for volunteers to participate to allow members to step forward when their schedules allowed.

Participants felt that a genuine opportunity to participate in policy decisions could also help to increase interest and participation in the SAC.

Role of the Principal

The important role that the principal plays both in finding members to sit on the SAC and in leading an effective SAC came up in each focus group. Participants agreed that the success of an SAC relied heavily on the work that the principal did to achieve buy-in and to bring issues to the SAC's attention.

LITERATURE SCAN

In Canada, principals were reported to play a crucial role in determining the effect that a SAC has within the school. Principals who viewed the SAC as an asset were more successful (Preston, 2008).

Communication

Many participants expressed the need for more and better communication about what is happening in the broader education system. Participants at several focus groups noted that SAC members often feel isolated and unaware of what is happening beyond their own school and they would like to see more information coming to SACs about what is happening at the regional/board level and the provincial level. Participants felt strongly that this would provide members with a better understanding of the key initiatives underway across the province and that they could then help to disseminate this information throughout their school community.

JURISDICTIONAL SCAN

Most provinces have a provincial association that represents the voice of parents and school councils. Specific roles and responsibilities of these associations vary from province to province but generally they have a role in:

- **providing resources, supports and services to enhance parent engagement and council effectiveness;**
- **allowing members to network and keep abreast of provincial educational matters; and**
- **presenting the parent perspective to government and education organizations.**

Participants acknowledged that better communication could also be initiated by the SACs. They felt that SACs could be more transparent in communicating meeting minutes, meeting agendas, and SAC contact information to parents and the school community. Many participants felt that this could be accomplished through a greater presence on the school website. Some participants noted that the SAC could also upload and post newsletters on the website.

LITERATURE SCAN

In order to promote greater community engagement, Preston (2011) recommends that SAC information and accomplishments be made available through academic and social networks, community flyers, the school webpage, the school newsletter, and in signage around the school.

Participants agreed that any changes to the role of SACs should be accompanied with resources to help inform parents and community members about the new roles and responsibilities. In addition to documents such as the SAC Handbook, these resources should also include a one-pager or pamphlet that parents could read quickly to understand the changes.

Composition

All participants stressed the need for greater flexibility, within guidelines, with respect to the composition of SACs. Participants felt that the current rules around the composition of SACs (outlined in the SAC Handbook) are too rigid and most schools have had to make adjustments in order to keep their SAC viable. The majority of participants, especially in rural areas, noted that it was consistently difficult to find volunteers to participate on SACs, in particular community representatives, with few exceptions. Participants at all focus groups noted that the success of a SAC, in particular in recruiting members, relies heavily on the principal reaching out to encourage parents/ community members to participate.

Generally, participants felt that the size of the SAC could range between a low of 7 members, for smaller schools, and a high of 18 members for larger schools. Most agreed that between 10 and 12 members was an ideal size. Where possible, participants noted that it is important to have representation from parents and students representing a range of grades, as the needs of students are often different by grade level. However, participants also acknowledged that it can be a struggle to get parent representatives from all grade levels.

LITERATURE SCAN

Research has shown that student voice is an important component of SACs. Burnitt and Gunter (2013) argue that school leaders should foster an environment of equity where students can raise ideas and concerns. They further note that SACs often focus on students with effective communication skills, which can limit the diversity of students actively involved in SACs.

Almost all participants agreed that there should be some required seats/members on each SAC, including the principal and representation from parents and school staff. Many participants shared the value of a student representative or student voice on the SAC, especially in higher grades. Most participants also felt that a community member or representative should be on the SAC, but recognized that flexibility is needed as it is often very difficult to fill this seat. Other participants noted the value of including representation from the municipality or town council where possible.

Participants acknowledged the benefit of term lengths for members of SACs; however, participants indicated that imposing term lengths on SACs in their current state was not appropriate as many SACs can only function because of a core group of volunteers who return year after year. Most participants felt that there should be flexibility regarding term lengths (for example, through the SAC's Letter of Agreement). Many felt that if volunteers were willing to give their time to sit on the SAC, then they should not be asked to leave after a period of three years.

Participants explained that the membership on SACs does not always reflect the diversity of the student population in the school. Participants noted that SACs need to have a vision to support every child in the school to achieve academic success. As a result, there is a need to find ways for SACs to engage with students, parents, and families from a wide-range of cultural and social backgrounds to ensure their voices are being heard and their needs addressed.

LITERATURE SCAN

Recruiting members who represent marginalized and diverse groups is viewed as especially challenging in Canada (Preston 2012).

Where possible, participants noted it was helpful to recruit parents of children who are just entering school. In many cases, these members will stay involved for the duration of their child's time at that school. According to participants, recruitment of parents to the SAC becomes more difficult in junior high and high school.

Some participants felt that SACs should only represent one school, while others saw the benefit of combining SACs for a group of schools that were geographically close together. In the case of combined SACs, participants agreed that equal representation from all schools is important. They further noted that this would only work if the schools shared a common climate and culture. Again, participants stressed the need for flexibility, noting that if a smaller school did not want to combine its SAC, it should not be forced to do so.

Meetings

A number of participants suggested that there could be local, regional, and provincial SAC meetings each year. The local meetings would be school site or small family of school meetings, as is current practice. Some participants felt that the number of these meetings could be reduced if additional regional and/or provincial meetings were added. This would help ensure that the burden on volunteer time did not increase too dramatically.

JURISDICTIONAL SCAN

Several jurisdictions, including British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and the Northwest Territories, have groups at the regional, district, or board level that represent the SACs in the geographical area.

In British Columbia, Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) may elect one member to be the representative on a district parents' advisory council (DPAC). The DPAC representative:

- Acts as a liaison between the PAC and DPAC;
- Communicates information to and from their PAC; and
- Brings forward issues that may be common to more than one school.

In Ontario, all school boards are required to have a Parent Involvement Committee (PIC), which works to actively support school councils.

Participants suggested that there could be one or two regional meetings where SACs or representatives from each SAC in a region were brought together. Similarly, participants felt that an annual provincial meeting for all SACs or members from all SACs would be beneficial. They felt that this would allow SACs to:

- Learn from one another and share best practices;
- Communicate their concerns and issues to the region/province; and
- Receive information and/or professional development from the region/province.

Some participants also noted that regional and provincial meetings would give centre/board and EECD staff the opportunity to solicit feedback on new initiatives or find potential volunteers to participate in additional focus groups or consultations on a particular issue.

Supports for SACs

Participants felt that SACs would benefit from more training and development opportunities to enable a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of SACs. Several participants acknowledged that participation on the SAC can be intimidating for many people. More information about what the SAC is and what the member expectations are may help to break down that initial barrier.

Participants felt that providing training and development to SAC members regarding their roles and responsibilities could help people understand the function of an SAC, which would, in turn, lead to more effective SACs. Participants noted that this type of development would be particularly important if Government planned to introduce changes to the form, function, or roles of SACs.

LITERATURE SCAN

Training for SACs needs to go beyond reading printed materials. Training programs should be flexible, expose members to multiple educative themes, and be hospitable toward the needs of the school and its students (Preston 2008).

During discussions on a number of the themes related to the role of SACs, participants suggested additional supports that could be provided to strengthen SACs and help them to function more effectively. These ranged from funding to training and development opportunities to resources and handouts that could be provided to members and the school community to better explain the role of SACs.

Participants had mixed feelings about SACs having access to funding. Some participants did not feel that SACs should have access to funding as they were not the most appropriate body to determine how money should be spent within the school. Other participants felt that SACs should provide feedback and advice to the principal on how funding should be allocated, but did not want to be tasked with making the final decision regarding spending or with managing budgets. Still others noted that if funding was available to SACs it could be used to support greater participation from parents who may not traditionally have volunteered to be on an SAC. Support could come in the form of transportation and/or childcare to help these parents attend meetings.

LITERATURE SCAN

Some schools in the United States have had success providing grants to SACs. In Utah, a fund was provided to assist SACs in implementing plans to increase student achievement. One example of this fund's success was providing teachers additional payment to run a homework club after school (Nygaard, 2010).

Some participants felt that funding could also be used to support activities that align with the school improvement plans. Participants felt strongly that funding should be student focused and that clear

guidelines around the use of funding would be needed. One participant noted that they would like to be able to have proposals brought forward to the SAC and funds distributed similarly to the Student Support Grants.

Correspondence Regarding Enhanced SAC Role

In response to the release of the *Raise the Bar* Report (January 2018) and Government's introduction of the *Education Reform Act* (March 2018), many Nova Scotians wrote letters and emails to the Premier, the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, their respective MLAs and other elected officials to voice their questions, concerns, and suggestions regarding the proposed expanded role of SACs. The comments included in this correspondence echoed much of the feedback received from the focus groups with SAC members.

There appeared to be confusion and a misconception for some people that enhancing the role of SACs would mean that SAC members will be expected to perform the duties previously held by school board members. People expressed discomfort with the idea that these responsibilities would be pushed down to volunteer groups like SACs, especially when teachers, parents and other community members who volunteer their time already appear to be spread quite thin.

The main points raised in the correspondence that was received included apprehension regarding how the role of SAC members might change, existing challenges with recruitment and retention of SAC members, concerns regarding how SAC voices will be heard at the regional and provincial levels; and a desire for increased training opportunities for SAC members.

Some people felt that in order for SACs to succeed, principals need to value the voices of parents and community members. They also suggested that enhanced SACs would require strong support from the regional centres for education/CSAP. Others suggested that to encourage more participation in SACs, they would need to be supported in a new way (e.g., finding ways to reward schools with vibrant SACs, offering workshops to make the roles of SAC members clearer, and opening lines of communication between all SAC partners so that they are working towards the same goal.)

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Appendix 1

Guiding Questions for the Focus Groups with School Advisory Councils

1. **What should be the duties and responsibilities of the SAC?**
 - a. What duties should continue?
 - b. What new duties should be added?
 - c. What duties, if any, should be removed?

2. **What supports are needed?**
 - a. What existing supports should continue?
 - b. What new supports are needed?

3. **What should the membership of the enhanced SAC look like?**
 - a. How do we ensure a broad membership with representation from different groups at school and regional level?
 - b. Should there be required representation (e.g., principal, parent, community member, etc.)?
 - c. What is the appropriate composition and size of the SAC?

4. **How can we ensure a robust channel of communication between the SACs, regional centres/CSAP, and the department?**
 - a. Regional meetings, annual meetings?
 - b. Website presence?

5. **Other comments/suggestions.**