

Pragmatic policy development in the establishment  
of the school council at Fairvale primary school

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### Significance of the Issue

The year 1994 was the original time frame for each state school - primary or secondary to have established its School Council. The formation of school councils is a central component of the Schools Renewal Program of The Department of School Education (NSW) arising from the Scott Report.

Some overseas and interstate reports on the operation of school councils are not always favourable. This is particularly so where councils have sought to impose their priorities on the school administration and program, such as the "hiring and firing" of staff and monitoring of the curriculum.

Proposals in N.S.W. do not envisage school councils as having direct responsibilities for the curriculum; this already being the province of the Board of Studies, nor in the appointment of staff, although community participation is provided for in the selection of staff. The major premise on which councils are proposed in NSW is the desirability of community participation and the principle of local decision making.

Towards the end of 1993 the majority of state schools had moved towards establishing their councils. There were some schools, however without any plans. The school in this study was one such school.

Two problems emerged in the formation and operation of school councils. These are: The level of school staff support; and the level of local community involvement. Successful councils emerge from a climate of strong partnership between the school staff and the community, not only in the form and management of the council but more importantly in their mutual endorsement of priorities.

### Method

A survey was designed to probe and identify:

a. Areas of demand, priority and expectation of the school and its

staff:

particularly relating to student welfare, facilities, educational attainment, curriculum development and decision making within the school.

b. Differences between priorities and expectations between the school staff and parents as representatives of the community.

c. Differences between sub-sets of the school staff; executive, teachers and support staff on the areas of demand, priority and expectation of the school and its staff:

d. Differences between sub-sets of the parents; as expressed in home

language groups on the areas of demand, priority and expectation of the school and its staff:

The surveys were administered to the school executive, classroom teachers and support staff. A further sample of 100 families, reflecting the home language mix of the school were chosen at random with the co-operation of the School's Community Liaison Officer. The parents' surveys for non English speaking home language families were produced in a bi-lingual form.

Replies were received from School Staff: Number Response rate

Executive 466.66%

Teachers 956.25%

Support 375.00%

Overall 1661.53%

Parents:

English 1640.00%

Chinese 620.00%

Vietnamese 416.00%

Arabic 440.00%

Spanish 120.00%

Overall 3131.00%

Results

Expectations of responsibility for the school's educational program were ranked (Section 1)

Priority Staff Parents

- 1TeachersTeachers
- 2PrincipalPrincipal
- 3ParentsSchool Council
- 4Local CommunityParents
- 5GovernmentGovernment
- 6School CouncilLocal community
- 7Local Business CommunityLocal Business Community

Priorities demanded of the school environment were ranked (Section 3)

PriorityStaff Parents

- 1StimulatingSafe
- 2SafeHappy
- 3HappyStimulating
- 4Problem-solvingComfortable
- 5ComfortableProblem-solving

The expectations of possible benefits from the School Council were ranked (Section 5)

PriorityStaff Parents

- 1Use of resourcesEducational Goals
- 2Public RelationsSafety in Grounds/Buildings
- 3Safety in Grounds/BuildingsCurriculum Development
- 4Financial ManagementFinancial Management
- 5Educational GoalsUse of resources
- 6Curriculum DevelopmentPublic Relations

The role of the School Council

In responding to Section 2, 56.25% of the members of the school staff indicated that they did not expect the School Council to help in the management of the school, or make more skills available for decisions concerning the school, and 87.5% considered that the Council would be yet another committee. By contrast, the parents were strongly expecting that the Council would help in the management of the school (82.75%, and would bring wider perspectives on decisions that affect the school (79.36%), while 72.41% considered that a Council would add

to the pool of available skills.

Parents were more willing than teachers (62.08% to 25.00%) to consider that the School Council would be able to work with the Parents and Citizens' Association, although a higher percentage of parents than teachers (34.48% to 25.00%) thought that the Council might replace the Association.

#### The Impact of the School Council on the School Program

Responses to Section 4 revealed a strong antithesis between the parents and members of the school staff. On every measure probed when parents reported a strong affirmative the school staff had a negative majority.

No member of the staff considered that the Council would improve the educational work of the school, whilst two thirds of parents considered this might result from the establishing of a Council. The parents were most strongly supportive (80%) of the Council's role in improving and sharing the management of the school, and 83.34% saw the Council as a means of developing a partnership between parents and teachers.

By contrast three quarters of the school staff did not see the Council as improving school management and 68.75% were not convinced that the Council could be a vehicle for developing a parent- teacher partnership.

#### Commitment to a School Council

Although only 43.34% of parents were willing to serve on the School council, 70% of the group responding indicated that their school needed one. This indication contrasted with only 12.5% of the school staff reporting that their school needed a council, although nearly a third of the staff indicated that they were willing to serve as members.

There was a high level of agreement between both the parents and the teachers who were willing to become members of the council in that all reported a conviction that decision be made by as wide a group of people as possible, and all the parent group together with 70% of the

teachers considered that schools should be as open to their community as possible.

#### Discussion

The study indicated little congruence between expectations and priorities of the two major stakeholders involved in School Councils -

parents and teachers. This was particularly evidenced in the positive expectations of parents compared with the negative expectations of the school staff of what would flow from establishing a Council.

The results confirm to some extent the accepted mythology concerning teachers' unwillingness to share the work of the school with others who might be considered outsiders. This was shown strongly when none of the teachers considered that a Council would have any valuable impact on the educational work of the school. A further indication of this negative attitude is shown by the low support of a School Council as a means for developing a partnership between teachers and parents. This split is confirmed from the responses to Section 5, where teachers relegated the educational issues to be of no concern to a Council whereas parents saw them as of the highest priority.

It might be argued that the role set in the guidelines for School Councils by the Department of School Education (N.S.W.) does not envisage any direct responsibility for curriculum or teaching might well support the "correctness" of the teachers' response to this question. On the other hand, I would argue that forming an effective partnership between school and community will have educational outcomes, although they may not form part of the regular teaching and learning processes of the school.

The results for the parents are to be treated carefully, owing to the low response rate. One can only speculate on their firm meaning. It may indicate that most parents are content with the status quo., and are not particularly interested in change. It may indicate that many parents do not consider they have any role in the management of the school. The lower rates from most of the non English speaking groups could be some suggestion of this. It may be an indication of apathy or even of resistance to government initiatives.

There are several implications for the school management to take up if a School council is successfully to be established in this school. The staff had to be convinced that a council will assist in rather than detract from their work as teachers. This is a task for the school leadership.

Additionally the school has to be a focus for further convincing the community, as represented by the parents, of the value of their support for and participation in a School council. It is quite a challenge for a primary school to undertake a vary broadly-based and quite specific adult educational project.

#### Implications for Further Work

These findings also raise issues concerning concepts of professionalism held by teachers and the wider community. Education does not share

with some of the learned professions, the privilege of a special mystique for its professional knowledge. Teachers may be seen as the experts, but not the exclusive experts in educational ideas and practice.

Additionally, political and other decisions affecting the workplace and the control and confidence that teachers experience may also raise anxiety among teachers about their status and lower their self-esteem as professionals.

Government fiat for implementing policy also raise some ethical issues in making schools and their staff the locus for convincing local communities of and implementing policy.

There is also a problem of using demand and legislation for achieving some basic education towards democratic participation in school governance. Sharing responsibilities and involvement are central to a democratic way of life, but it questionable when these are demanded rather than invited.

## Conclusion

On the broader view, the problem investigated in this micro study is one of educational management, and particularly the management of change. Effective change will be facilitated when the priorities and expectations of the various stakeholders are in greater accord. Given government and system demands will not materially change, and the community can expect to increase is participation, then the school staff is the immediate arena in which significant attitude and expectation change will need to occur.

Keywords: School Councils; Policy Implementation

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## APPENDIX 1

### Management in Your School

#### Section 1

Place the numbers 1 - 7 beside each of the following in order of

importance - (1 is for the most important and 7 for the least important) as it completes the following statement

The most important responsibility for establishing the school's educational program lies with

- a.the parents-----
- b.the community where the school is located-----
- c.the school principal-----
- d.the teachers-----
- e.the school council-----
- f.the government-----
- g.the local business people-----

#### Section 2

Circle the word after each sentence that best represents your point of view

- a.A school council will help with the management of the schoolAgree  
Disagree Not Sure
- b.A school council will make more skills available for decisionsAgree  
Disagree Not Sure
- c.A school council will be yet another committeeAgree Disagree  
Not Sure
- d.A school council will rep[lace the work of the P & C AssociationAgree  
Disagree Not Sure
- e.A school council will bring a wider perspective to decisions that

affect the school Agree Disagree Not Sure  
 f. A school council will supplement the work of the P & C Association  
 Agree Disagree Not Sure

Section 3

Place the numbers 1 - 7 beside each of the following in order of importance - (1 is for the most important and 7 for the least important) as it completes the following statement

The environment that school should provide for student learning is best described as

- a. safe-----
- b. happy-----
- c. comfortable-----
- d. problem-solving-----
- e. stimulating-----
- f. other -----

Section 4

Circle the word after each sentence that best represents your point of view

Establishing a school council will

- a. improve the educational work of the school Agree Disagree Not Sure
- b. give a school a better community profile Agree Disagree Not Sure
- c. improve school facilities Agree Disagree Not Sure
- d. improve school management Agree Disagree Not Sure
- e. help share the responsibility for managing the school Agree Disagree Not Sure
- f. improve community access to school facilities Agree Disagree Not Sure
- g. help the community understand the needs of the school Agree Disagree Not Sure
- h. help in developing a partnership between teachers and parents Agree Disagree Not Sure

Section 5



Please return the completed form in the stamped addressed envelope provided

## APPENDIX 2

### Percentage Responses

#### Section 2

##### Staff Parents

	Yes	No	Not Sure	Yes	No	Not Sure
a.	18.75	56.25	25.00	82.73	10.34	6.86
b.	18.75	56.25	25.00	72.41	10.34	17.24
c.	87.50	12.50	00.00	39.28	28.58	32.14
d.	25.00	56.25	18.75	34.48	41.39	24.13
e.	31.25	43.75	25.00	79.36	3.40	17.24
f.	25.00	37.50	37.50	62.08	17.24	20.68

#### Section 4

##### Staff Parents

	Yes	No	Not Sure	Yes	No	Not Sure
a.	00.00	81.25	18.75	56.67	6.67	26.66
b.	18.75	68.75	12.50	73.34	3.33	23.33
c.	18.75	62.50	18.75	70.00	3.33	26.67
d.	6.25	75.00	18.75	80.00	3.33	16.67
e.	18.75	56.25	25.00	80.00	6.67	13.33
f.	18.75	56.25	25.00	63.34	10.00	26.66
g.	25.00	62.50	25.00	76.67	3.33	20.00
h.	12.50	68.75	18.25	58.34	3.33	13.33

#### Section 6

Staff Parents

	Yes	No	Not Sure	Yes	No	Not Sure
a.	12.50	81.25	6.25	70.00	3.33	26.67
b.	31.75	62.50	6.25	43.34	30.00	26.66
c.		100.00	00.00	00.00	00.00	100.00
d.	70.00	00.00	30.00		100.00	00.00
e.						
f.	50.00	50.00	00.00	4.71	23.51	11.78
g.	60.00	40.00	00.00	7.69	69.24	23.07
h.	00.00	90.00	10.00	57.14	21.43	21.43
i.	90.00	10.00	00.00	30.77	38.46	30.77