

## School Council Member Perceptions and Actual Practice of School Councils in Rural Schools

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*In a time of growing interest in accountability, sharing school governance with parents, teachers, the community, and business leaders has become a norm. School councils or advisory groups have become a requirement for schools in many states. This research examined school council members' perceptions of issues addressed by the councils and council effectiveness in rural Georgia. Additionally, this research examined the relationship between council members' perceptions of school council effectiveness among council member constituent groups and the difference between council members' perceptions of issues addressed and actual issues addressed. The research identified factors school council members believed to be important for school council effectiveness. The data were gathered through a survey of school council members in the forty-one county Valdosta State University service area. Actual issues addressed were obtained through a content analysis of school council minutes. Implications for educational practice in rural schools included a process of involving of a variety of constituents in policy making at the school level in an attempt to improve student academic performance and principals hold the key to council effectiveness.*

In the United States before the 1960s, community involvement in schools was synonymous with supporting schools, paying taxes, voting for board members, and working with traditional school/parent organizations. Most educators believed the community should not be involved in school governance, although they often called on key community members to rally support for school policies (Davies, Clasby, Zerchykov, & Powers, 1977). Today the situation is much different. School councils have been mandated in many areas, some serving in an advisory capacity and others having decision-making powers. The purpose of this study was to examine member perceptions of the school councils in a mostly rural region of one southern state.

Federal programs of the 1960s and 1970s initiated the move toward implementation of school councils (Brown, 1994). Several states followed the federal lead and established school councils that gave advice and made recommendations to school site administrators. In many cases, councils of this era served to legitimize administrators' decisions (Davies, Stanton, Clasby, Zerchykov, & Powers., 1977).

In more recent times, school councils, as a mechanism to implement shared decision making, have become a cornerstone of school improvement activities. Fullan (1997) noted that the presence of school councils per se will not improve student achievement, but nothing motivates a child more than a climate in which learning is valued by a partnership of school, family, and community. Ballard and Waghorn (1997) pointed to the need to find balance between opposing interests of various constituent groups. School councils were seen as a way to achieve this balance (Malen & Ogawa, 1985).

Chicago, in 1989, and Kentucky, in 1990, enacted sweeping school improvement designs that included creating school councils with decision-making powers. These plans were implemented to address low student achievement, high dropout rates, discipline problems, fiscal problems, and low public support for schools (Easton & Storey, 1994; Lindle, 1992b).

In 2000, the Georgia General Assembly passed the A-Plus Reform Act of 2000, a major component of which was the formation of school councils. These councils consist of the principal, two teachers, two parents of students in the school, and two local business partners. Their mandated role is to provide advice and recommendations on any school matter, including recommendation to the board of education of a candidate for the principalship of the school in the event of a vacancy in the position. (Georgia School Council Institute, 2000). The school councils in Georgia were created to bring communities and schools closer together in a spirit of cooperation to solve difficult educational problems, improve academic achievement, provide support for teachers and administrators, and bring parents into the school-based decision-making process. In addition, school councils were to provide advice, recommendations, and assistance to principals and local boards of education (Georgia School Council Institute, 2000).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine school council members' perceptions of issues addressed and council effectiveness. In addition, the study examined the relationship between council members' perceptions of school council effectiveness among council member

constituent groups, and the difference between council member perceptions of issues addressed and actual issues addressed by school councils. A final purpose of the study was to identify factors school council members believed to be important for school council effectiveness. Council member perceptions were obtained through a survey of school council members in the 41-county Valdosta State University service area, and actual issues addressed were obtained through a content analysis of school council meeting minutes.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were posed for this study:

1. What were the perceptions of school council members concerning effectiveness of school councils?
2. Was there a difference in the perceptions of school council effectiveness among the school council member constituent groups?
3. Was there a difference between school council member constituent groups' perceptions concerning issues addressed and actual issues addressed?
4. What factors did school council members believe contributed to school council effectiveness?

### **Procedures**

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for this study. Elementary school councils implemented in the 2001-2002 school year in the Valdosta State University service area were asked to participate in the study, and all school council members in all these elementary schools were invited to participate by completing the survey. Eighty elementary school councils were identified for inclusion in the study. The schools in the VSU service area except for Dougherty County Schools, Valdosta City Schools, and Lowndes County Schools, which are small cities, were located in rural, sparsely-populated areas. These three districts were excluded from the study. The 80 schools in the study represent a total of 80 principals, 160 teacher school council representatives, 160 parent school council members, and 160 business school council members who were eligible to participate in the study. From this eligible population there was a 55.7% response rate. In order to obtain data indicating actual issues addressed by school councils, elementary school councils that responded to the survey instrument were requested to provide minutes of school council meetings for the 2001-2002 school year. The return rate for council minutes was 52.5%.

Data were collected by the use of survey methodology and by content analysis of school council meeting minutes. The unit of analysis for this study was the service area.

Principals of schools with eligible school councils were mailed packets containing surveys and were asked to have all council members present at a school council meeting complete the survey. This survey, the Georgia School Council Member Survey, was a researcher-designed survey created to obtain pertinent demographic information, council members' perceptions concerning issues addressed by their councils, and council members' perceptions concerning their councils' effectiveness. An open-ended survey question was designed to provide data to develop a deeper understanding of council members' perceptions of school council effectiveness. Content validity for the survey was established before use in the study by members of an educational leadership graduate level class at Valdosta State University and by Valdosta State University educational leadership professors. A pilot study was conducted by having three elementary school councils not eligible for the study complete the survey to test the clarity and appropriateness of survey items.

Minutes of school council meetings were analyzed to obtain data concerning issues actually addressed by school councils. All school councils that responded to the survey instrument were asked to mail first-year minutes of school council meetings to the researcher. Council meeting minutes were analyzed to determine issues actually addressed by school councils during their initial year of implementation.

Quantitative procedures were the primary methods of data analysis for this study. Data from the survey were used to determine school council members' perceptions concerning effectiveness of school councils and to determine whether there were differences in the perceptions of school council effectiveness among the school council member constituent groups. In addition, survey data and content analysis of council meeting minutes were used to determine whether there were differences between school council members' perceptions of issues addressed and actual issues addressed. An open-ended survey question was used to gain a deeper understanding of council members' perceptions concerning school council effectiveness. Findings concerning perceptions of school council effectiveness, differences among constituent group perceptions, and differences between council members' perceptions of issues addressed and actual issues addressed were presented, along with a summary of findings from qualitative analysis of the open-ended survey question.

### **Data Analysis**

Participants' responses to survey items were entered onto a spreadsheet for data analysis with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 9.0 software (SPSS, 1999). Each school council that returned surveys was assigned a number for identification in SPSS to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of the participating councils. Demographic data indicating council member constituent

group were quantified and entered into SPSS, as were data indicating council members' perceptions for each survey issue. Data from the analysis of school council minutes were quantified and entered into SPSS. Each set of council minutes was assigned a number to maintain anonymity and confidentiality of the school councils.

After data indicating perceived issues addressed, perceived levels of effectiveness, and actual issues addressed were entered into SPSS, statistical tests were run in SPSS that enabled the researcher to address the study's research questions. Finally, the researcher analyzed the open-ended survey question responses, and identified frequencies of responses for issues school councils addressed effectively and for factors that enabled school councils to address issues effectively

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze each issue. The level of significance for these tests was set at .05. Because multiple ANOVAs were used in this analysis, the Bonferoni adjustment was used to correct the possibility of Type 1 error risk. The adjusted critical  $p$  value was .003.

To address research question four, participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question, "What is one survey issue you believe your council addressed effectively, and what factors enabled your council to effectively address this issue?" All responses to the open-ended question and were categorized by issue and by factor. Each of these responses contained an issue that the council member believed the council had addressed effectively, a perceived enabling factor for council effectiveness, or both.

### Summary of Findings

Research question 1 addressed the perceptions of school council members concerning the effectiveness of councils. In addition, school council members' perceptions of issues addressed in council meetings were studied. Results of the study indicated 88.2% of principals perceived school councils addressed the school improvement plan and 94.3% of principals in the study believed their councils addressed school council business issues at some point during the first year. The study found that 86.8% of principals' perceived councils addressed communication strategies at least once during the first year.

The survey for the current study was conducted for council member perceptions from the entire first year of council implementation. In the study, comparisons of teachers' and principals' percentages of *yes* responses for issues addressed indicated teachers perceived councils addressed 10 of the 16 survey issues more frequently than did principals. Those 10 issues were: system calendar preparation, conduct and dress codes, development of the school profile, recommendation of a new principal, school budget priorities, communications strategies, extracurricular activities, school use of facilities, development of the school improvement plan, and curriculum.

Concerning council member perceptions of effectiveness, data from the study indicated school council members generally perceived council effectiveness to be in the moderate range for most issues. Examination of descriptive data indicated that business member school council constituents perceived councils' level of positive effectiveness to be greater than other constituent groups' perceptions of positive effect on the 10 survey issues previously listed. In addition, data indicated principal school council members perceived the lowest level of positive effect among all constituent groups on every survey issue, with the exception of the council business procedure issue. For this issue, both principals and parents indicated the lowest level of positive effect ( $M = 3.82$ ).

A one-way ANOVA was used for research question 2 in order to address the statistical difference in perceptions of school council effectiveness among school council member constituent groups. Despite the results from the examination of descriptive statistics for research for question 1, there was no statistical difference in level of perceived council effectiveness among school council constituent groups for any issue.

Research question 3 addressed the statistical difference between school council member constituent groups' perceptions of issues addressed and actual issues addressed. Data from the analysis of school council minutes for the study indicated that 81% of school councils addressed daily school operations during council meetings and 73.8% of school councils addressed the somewhat routine issue of campus and building maintenance. In addition, 100% of school councils addressed school council business issues. In addition, school council meeting minutes for the study revealed that 100% of councils addressed curriculum issues, and 66.7% of councils addressed school improvement planning. Analysis also indicated issues of extracurricular activities, recommendation of a new principal, development of the school profile, and community use of school facilities were the least addressed issues in school council meeting minutes, with a 4.8% actual addressed rate.

For principals, there was a significant difference between perception of issues addressed and actual issues addressed for school profile development, communication strategies, extracurricular activities, community use of school facilities, student recognition activities, curriculum, and daily school operations. For teachers, there was a significant difference for school profile development, communication strategies, extracurricular activities, community use of facilities, student recognition activities, curriculum, and daily school operations. Finally, for the business member constituent group, there was a significant difference between actual issues addressed and perceptions of issues addressed for school profile development, communication strategies, extracurricular activities, community use of school facilities, school improvement plan development, student recognition activities, and daily school operations.

Research question 4 concerned one issue council members believed councils addressed effectively and factors that enabled school councils to effectively address that issue. Parental and community involvement and school and community communication were identified most frequently as issues addressed effectively. Factors enabling council effectiveness noted most often were open communication and availability of information. In addition, respondents in this study identified community input, similar to open communication, as a factor enabling school council effectiveness. Respondents in the study noted that teamwork and cooperation were key factors for council effectiveness. Few respondents identified the development of focus and administrative support as enabling factors for school council effectiveness.

### Conclusions

More than 80% of Georgia school council members perceived councils addressed several important issues, including development of the school improvement plan, communication strategies, and parent involvement strategies. Comparisons with a study by the Georgia School Council Institute (2001) indicated that 78% of school principals said that school councils addressed school improvement goals as a primary agenda item during the first few months of council implementation. Other issues discussed by school councils as indicated by the Georgia School Council Institute (2001) were procedural issues (33%), school business issues (94.3%), and communications strategies (86.6%).

Another high impact issue, curriculum, was perceived to be addressed by more than 66% of principals and by more than 75% of other school council members. Easton and Story (1994) also found that curriculum and school improvement planning were prevalent topics for school councils. School council members believed councils had only moderate levels of effectiveness in their involvement with those highly salient issues.

More than 90% of school council members believed councils addressed school council business procedures, and this issue received the highest level of positive effectiveness, with means in the 3.8 to the 3.9 ranges for all constituent groups. In contrast to school council business procedures, somewhat lower percentages of council member constituent groups perceived councils addressed daily school operations, with ranges varying from 28.3% for principals to 45.3% for business members. Overall, examination of the one-way ANOVA significance levels indicated that all school council constituent groups generally were in agreement concerning the levels of positive effect on issues councils addressed.

Another noteworthy conclusion, based on examination of means of perceived effectiveness, was that the principal constituent group perceived the lowest level of positive effect among all constituent groups on every survey issue

except council business procedures. On this issue, principals and parents obtained the lowest level of positive effect ( $M = 3.82$ )

The comparison of means of actual issues addressed with means of council members' perceptions of issues addressed led to significant conclusions. Although more than 84% of school council members believed their school councils addressed communication strategies, analysis of council minutes indicated only 59.5% of councils actually addressed communication strategies. In addition, there was significant difference between actual issues addressed in council minutes and perceptions of issues addressed for all constituent groups for issues of school profile development, extracurricular activities, community use of facilities, student recognition activities, and daily school operation. There was significant difference between actual issues addressed and perceived issues addressed in curriculum issues for principals, teachers, and parents, and for the school improvement plan issue for business members. Consideration of these results led to the conclusion that first-year school councils in the study often failed to develop priorities for action or focus for issues to be addressed. Rather, as noted by Kannapel, Moore, Coe, & Aagaard (1994), many first-year school councils often targeted issues that were problematic at the school. Eighty-one percent of school councils in this study addressed issues of daily school operations, according to their council meeting minutes. Malen and Ogawa (1985) noted that school councils influenced only the day-to-day operations of schools. Easton, Flinspach, Ford, Quallis, Ryan, & Story (1991) concurred, noting that school councils discussed an average of 10 issues at each meeting, with much of the discussion centered on school management. Easton and Story (1994) offered similar findings, indicating that the prevalent topic for school councils were council business issues and the day-to-day routine matters of running the school.

Finally, school council members most often identified open communications and availability of information as factors enabling school council effectiveness. In addition, participants believed that input from the community, cooperation and teamwork, and development of a focus for council action were important factors for school council effectiveness. These findings are supported by similar findings noted by Bondy, Kilgore, Ross, & Webb (1994), Johnson and Pajares (1996), David (1994), and Smith (1993), who suggested effective school councils opened channels of communication. David (1994) and Benson (1998) noted that honest and sufficient information was needed for effective school council operations. Easton and Story (1994) reported that councils must work cooperatively and collaboratively to be effective in leading school improvement. Council members in the study recognized effective factors that also were identified in the literature. However, few council members identified administrative support as a factor for school council effectiveness.

### Implications for Rural Schools

A goal of this study was to examine the perceived and actual practices of first-year elementary school councils. If, as some investigators believed, educators must understand multi-constituent points of view to be successful in today's educational environment, the successful development of school councils or some other shared decision-making mechanism is important for schools to become more effective (Yanitski, 1998). Yanitski (1998) defines pluralism in public education as collective participation in the decision-making process through some form of representation and implies the fundamental belief that people in a pluralistic society affected by governments' decisions and institutional policies have an inalienable right to contribute in the development of decisions and policies. School councils, designed to insure representation to all segments of a pluralistic society, were mandated for Georgia schools. Principals, teachers, parents, and business partners have invested time and effort in the implementation of these councils. In addition, school reform is considered crucial for all rural students. Implications for future practice might be considered by policy makers and by local school councils in order to implement more effective school councils.

Studies indicated that some school councils improved over time (Johnson and Pajares, 1996; Meyers, Meyers, Millis, Truscott Gelheiser, & Krivisky, 1997). Klecker, Austin, & Burns (2000) noted that a high turnover rate of school council members created situations of inexperienced councils who might not have matured to the point of considering issues of high salience. Local councils should consider staggering the terms of council members, avoiding the scenario of beginning council operations every two years with new, inexperienced councils.

This study noted that principals, the individuals who, according to the literature, are keys to council effectiveness, were the school council constituent group with the lowest perceptions of positive council effect. Principals were mandated to implement councils in their schools, yet they had very little input in initial school council policy development. Policy makers might consider readdressing the implementation of school councils, including requests for broad-based principal input when developing revised school council recommendations. Reforms designed by constituents who implement changes are more likely to be successful than mandated change (Allen, Hensley, Rogers, Glanton, & Livingston, 1999). When school principals support school councils, those organizations may be more effective in leading school reform efforts.

According to the shared decision-making literature, school councils that developed focus or an action plan tended to be more effective. Based on conclusions from this study, data indicated school council members were somewhat unsure whether they had addressed several important issues. Local school councils may consider a clear

plan of action, focusing on a few issues deemed important by the council and the school community.

Data indicated that 81% of school councils in the study addressed the daily operation of the school. If councils are to realize their potential as organizations designed to bring the community and school together in a spirit of cooperation and increase student achievement, teachers and school administrators should be responsible for the day-to-day routine matters of running the school. As school councils develop their focus and action plan, council members might be prudent to avoid addressing daily school operations.

Council members in the study identified several factors, including open communications, availability of information, cooperation, teamwork, and development of focus, as factors that enabled school councils to address an issue effectively. Local school councils might consider participation in site-based professional development designed to enable councils and school communities to nurture those enabling factors. Because shared decision-making literature identifies a facilitative principal as one of the most important factors for school council success, principals may consider participating in additional leadership development programs to improve their knowledge and skills in the areas of collaboration and shared decision-making.

School councils have provided a means to involve significant segments of the community in discussions about local schools. This study seems to indicate that school councils do have a positive effect on issues addressed by the councils. Probably one of most important findings is that school councils have opened lines of communication and made accurate information available to the communities they represent.

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