Support and Resources for Site-Based Decision-Making Councils: Perceptions of Former Council Members of Two Large Kentucky School Districts

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Legislation has directed schools to convene school councils that typically address issues related to curriculum, instruction, budget, and governance as one means to improve schooling. However, the expectation for improved schools through this involvement remains a challenge. The study examined issues connected to council operation in two large Kentucky school districts. Seventy-six former council members responded to twenty-nine items on a mail-out questionnaire. The areas investigated included training, support, and member effectiveness from the perspective of community members and teacher members. The findings include suggestions to improve council effectiveness and new emphasis for principal and member training.

Keywords: School councils; Council effectiveness; Training and support; Decision-making; Parent; Teacher involvement

A Nation At Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) called for substantial educational reform in the areas of expectations for student achievement, assessment, use of instructional time, and curriculum. Of the many recommendations in the report the authors emphasized an increase of citizen involvement in oversight of school reform efforts and in school governance.

Decentralization of decision making was a central tenet of education reform. Decentralization of authority was not new to school restructuring proposals and was influenced by societal drive to decentralization in business and government (Rallis, 1990). School based-decision making refers specifically to the decentralization of authority from the district to the school-level, including teachers, parents and administrators (Riesgraf, 2002). Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1991) identified four things that have to change during restructuring: (a) decentralize, both administratively and politically, (b) empower those closest to the students, (c) create new roles and responsibilities for all the stakeholders, and

(d) restructure the teaching-learning process. From this cauldron emerged the concept of the locally controlled schools, so that decisions that most affect the local school are actually made *at the school level*. Most of these local governance structures at the schools consist of the principal, teachers, and parents. The Chicago school system initiated one of the first efforts to pursue a major decentralization. In describing the Chicago initiative Hess (1991) stated that Local School Councils (LSC) were established at each school site to make decisions regarding the goals of this law and to utilize allocated resources to support school improvement.

In 1985, sixty-six of the one-hundred seventy-six school districts in Kentucky filed a lawsuit claiming that the finance system for education violated the state constitution because it did not provide an efficient system of education for all students in the commonwealth. In 1989, in *Rose v. Council for Better Education*, 790 S. W. 2d 186, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled that the state's school system was unconstitutional. The court ordered the General Assembly to reform the property tax system and to provide an adequate education for every child. In defining an adequate education, the court specified learning goals.

In 1990, the Kentucky legislature used the court ordered education reforms to enact a comprehensive package of education reforms known as the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which focused on three areas: curriculum and instruction, school finance, and school governance. Among the many provisions, the act (a) created an equitable funding formula for education state-wide, (b) established a standardized state curriculum, (c) set academic expectations for student learning, (d) initiated a state-wide testing system, (e) set goals for student attendance, successful transition to adult life and retention, and (f) provided for additional professional development for teachers. Petrosko (1993) claimed that KERA had the greatest impact on education reform efforts in "recent history."

KERA established school councils, school-based decision making (SBDM), as the new form of governance (Din, 1997). The legislation supports the premise that teachers, parents and school administrators are closest to the students and should exercise authority over the strategies, resources and conditions of learning (Foster, 1999; Lindle & Moore, 2004). Björk and Keedy (2002) saw decentralization of decision-making in Kentucky's schools in keeping with school reform across the United States and they agreed that it was necessary to give teachers more control over what happens in schools. Guided by state goals, individual Kentucky schools assume the responsibility for student performance by making decisions about curriculum and instruction, the learning environment, use of resources, and staffing. Foster (1999), serving as Kentucky's Secretary of Education during the creation and implementation of KERA, maintained that the rationale for SBDM councils would ensure academically successful schools. Foster maintained that formal council structure would ensure participation of the faculty in the instructional decisions in the school and would replace the arbitrary, authoritarian atmosphere found in many schools.

According to the legislation, SBDM councils can change the school structure to improve student achievement. However, the success and the magnitude of decisions made by councils have varied. When Harp (1995) studied council use of time, he indicated that councils spent more time addressing questions concerning school-operations than confronting school policy. For example, he noted that teachers were doing well in selecting education materials and in collaborative efforts, but were less effective in integrating learning

and using new teaching strategies. Harp's observations were echoed by Klecker, Austin and Burns (1999) who indicated that Kentucky school councils may be limited in enhancing student achievement because they are often concerned with non-instructional matters. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) studied councils' decisions and found no significant relationship between SBDM councils and student achievement. Heger and Lindahl (1993) and Schneider (1984), observed that teachers reflecting their own interests and expertise prefer familiar situations rather than venture into unfamiliar territory. Further Heger and Lindahl found that teachers felt they should have continued involvement in areas similar to those before decentralization. This may approach the issue of effective and ineffective councils. Willingness to tackle areas outside the comfort zone which affect things such as student achievement may be the crucial element which distinguishes effective from ineffective councils.

Kannapel, Aagaard, Coe, and Reeves (2000) in their study of systemic reform in four rural Kentucky school districts found that SBDM councils were not the primary means for making curricular and instructional decisions, though the law specifically gives school councils power and responsibility to make those decisions. They indicated that "state and local education agencies need to provide councils with better information, guidelines, and training on how to be effectively involved in policy decisions about curriculum, instruction, and student learning . . . (p. xi). Peterson-del Mar (1994) stated that effective training was necessary if school-site councils were to be successful in reaching their goals and that training should include group decision making strategies for resolving conflict and culture building. Without adequate preparation and training for their work, Peterson-del Mar emphasized that council members might be prone to assume authoritarian or passive roles and to think in individualistic rather than corporate terms.

In considering the future of councils in the Chicago schools, a LSC member stated (Richard, 2000) that councils received training in school law, use of resources and principal evaluation, but needed better training and guidance to avoid power struggles. Barnette and Hange (1994) in their study of site-based decision making in faculty senates of West Virginia, found that there was a need for training, a need for role clarification, and more support from school and district administration.

David (1994) reported similar findings about training. SBDM council members reported receiving training to introduce them to what SBDM is about but that there were major gaps in the types of available training. Most council members had no trouble finding training about the technical aspects of SBDM, but they lacked a deeper understanding of the purpose of the SBDM council and "their role in achieving the ultimate goals of KERA for student learning" (p. 4). David further noted the concern of some state level educators that by focusing on the technical skills, councils were detracting from the intent of the law, which resulted in councils micromanaging school operations rather than keeping concerns about the quality of teaching and learning in the forefront.

Peterson, Gok, and Warren (1995) indicated the need for training to develop effective working teams to ensure that the best student learning decisions were made. They stated that council members should be able to articulate a shared educational vision for the school and that they must have knowledge and skills in governance and decision-making, and the ability to develop effective working teams.

Training, however, is not all equal or effective. A study by Kannapel, Moore, Coe, and Aagaard (1994) indicated that training consisted of "one-shot workshops" with no follow-up support or evaluation and that often only the new council members participated in training. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) point out that this sort of one-shot training for individuals is ineffective at bringing about long-term, organizational change. Caldwell and Wood (1992) describe how effective SBDM teams were built in one school district in New York. They wrote, " . . . (T)he Council for Change provided training for the ad hoc committees to enable them to carry out their roles . . . . It wasn't surprising to learn that the more the ad hoc committees used the activities learned during in-service training, the greater the impact of their work" (p. 44). Under school based-decision Wohlstetter & Mohrman (1996) indicated that three kinds of knowledge and skills are important. First, council members need to be trained about instructional and programmatic changes of schools, including best practices in teaching, learning, and curriculum, if they are to knowledgeably contribute to decisions about school improvements. Secondly, council members need teamwork skills and training in group decision-making and ways to reach consensus. Finally, where council members are expected to assist in developing a budget or hiring staff, they need training on budgeting and personnel skills. The success of councils or lack thereof might best be summed up by Bernal (1996): "Do not try anything that is too ambitious without lots of training, parental preparation, and determining that the plan has a high likelihood of success based upon pilot efforts at your site" (p.6). The purpose of the present study was to determine the perceived effectiveness of the Site Based Decision Making councils and further to determine the effectiveness of the training and support the councils received to make informed decisions.

Background for Kentucky Site Based Councils

In 1990 the Kentucky Legislature mandated SBDM councils for schools failing to meet their academic achievement goals. Rather than just to serve as an advisory body, the school council was given the responsibility to govern the school for the purpose of enhancing student achievement. The basic council consists of three teachers, two parents, and the principal, who serves as the chairperson. Schools can expand their council membership as long as the proportions specified by the state are respected. Teachers are elected to the council by faculty vote. The parents of children attending the school elect parent council members. Most terms on the council are for one year, although some schools have two-year terms for all members. The SBDM law, KRS 160.345, requires that all council members be prepared for their responsibilities by a state certified trainer. New council members must receive a minimum of six hours of preparation within 30 days of the start of their terms and anyone who has served at least one year on any council is required to complete a minimum of three hours of training within 30 days of the beginning of his or her term. Training is to address school council policies and by-laws, school budgets, curriculum and instruction, professional development, schedules, instructional materials, utilization of facilities, decision making, personnel, and staffing. Council members may receive additional training specific to their needs.

Method

Four faculty members in the department of Educational Administration, Leadership, and Research developed the survey for former SBDM council members. The process included several revisions of the survey questions, based on comments of experts in the field who were knowledgeable about the workings of SBDM councils in Kentucky. The final version of the survey contained 29 questions, including Likert-type rating scales (11 items), open-ended items (11 items), and selecting the correct alternative (seven items).

A study of the reliability of the instrument was performed in the fall of 2005. Thirty-three graduate students who had served as SBDM council members were asked to complete the survey twice, with one week between. Test-retest reliability coefficients were calculated for each quantitative question on the survey, and a rate of agreement was calculated for the open-ended questions. The reliability study itself is reported elsewhere in this paper, but the range of coefficients for the quantitative items was from .31 to 1.00. One item (#5) asked the respondent to check all the activities of the council in which they participated; that item had lower reliability than the remainder of items on the survey. The range of coefficients on that item was from .31 to 1.00, and the median reliability for that item was .70 for elementary level council members, and .76 for middle and high school participants. The range of coefficients for the remaining items was from .47 to 1.00, and the median reliability was .81.

Names and addresses of all former SBDM council members over the last two years were obtained from the central offices of two of the six largest school districts in Kentucky. The two school districts were chosen because of accessibility and the fact that both contained schools that went from relatively small rural schools to larger, more urban schools. The two districts had a combined total of thirty-eight school councils governing approximately 26, 500 students. After approval of the Human Subjects Review Board, 131 surveys were sent to all past council members. A letter of introduction with an explanation of the study and a self addressed, stamped envelope were included with each survey. Each survey was coded with a number corresponding to the participant list so that the non-respondents could be contacted a second time. Participant responses were never associated with the names on the list, however. After three weeks, another survey was sent to those who did not respond to the first mailing.

Seventy-six of the sample (58%) returned the surveys. Descriptive data analysis procedures were applied to the 'alternative' and Likert-type questions, and content analysis procedures were applied to the open-ended items.

Findings

The information that follows reports percentage results from the survey and results of the open-ended questions that are connected to the percentages as well as some independent open-ended questions. The following section also includes a demographic overview and findings dealing with the support given to councils, effectiveness of councils, and training of councils from the perspective of former council members.

Demographics of Respondents

Eighty-three percent of the respondents were female, 65% were teachers, and 63% were affiliated with a council at an elementary school level with 22% at the middle school and 14% at the high school levels (See Table 1). Most of the respondents (89%) had at least two years experience serving on their SBDM council, and about half (49%) had more than two years' experience. Likewise, only 17% had served in schools with a new principal, and one fourth (25%) had served with principals who had been in the school for at least five years.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of past SBDM council members responding to questions about demographics

	Level			Group		Total
	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Parents	Teachers	
Time on council:						
1 year	6	2	0	5	3	8 (11%)
2 years	23	5	2	8	22	30 (40%)
More than 2 years	19	10	8	14	23	37 (49%)
Gender						
Male	4	5	4	6	7	13 (17%)
Female	44	12	7	21	42	63 (83%)
Years of principal						n = 63
Less than 1	7	1	3	5	6	11 (17%)
Between 2 and 5	23	8	5	10	26	36 (57%)
More than 5	11	4	1	6	10	16 (25%)
Parents	15	7	5	27		
Teachers	33	10	6		49	
Elementary				15	33	48 (63%)
Middle				7	10	17(22%)
High				5	6	11 (14%)
				n = 27 (35%)	n = 49 (65%)	n = 76

Respondents were asked to indicate the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) initiatives upon which their councils had concentrated during the time they served on the council. Frequencies are reported for parents and teachers separately and then combined to show the total number of frequencies for specific items.

At the elementary school level, initiatives marked by more than half the respondents were curriculum development (63%), assessment and accountability (58%), school based decision making (52%), school budget (63%), and personnel (60%). At the upper levels,

initiatives marked by more than half the respondents were curriculum development (54%), assessment and accountability (61%), and school based decision making (57%).

Respondents' Perceived Support for the Council

There were six questions about the level of support received by the council. The first question was about the level of general support received. About 65% rated the level of support as a 4 or 5 (*much or very much*), and 82% of those from middle school gave those ratings. Parents and teachers had similar percentages (69% and 63%, respectively) for ratings *much* and *very much* support. Principals and teachers got relatively high ratings for their support at all three levels; for example, 79% and 76% of all respondents rated the principal and teachers as *helpful* or *very helpful* (4 or 5). Fifty-nine percent gave the same ratings (4 or 5) to parent support and only 35% said community support was helpful or very helpful. The three school levels were about the same, 36%, 29%, and 36%, respectively, for elementary, middle, and high school respondents, and the percentage of teachers giving ratings of 4 or 5 was 31%. More parents (42%) gave ratings of 4 or 5 for community support. Central office support was rated helpful or very helpful by 61% of the respondents: 63% of elementary respondents, 41% of middle school respondents, and 82% of high school respondents. High school respondents felt more supported by their central offices than the other two school levels. More parents (81%) gave higher ratings of central office support than did teachers (50%).

In addition to the data above expressed in percentages, open-ended questions (number 15 through 20) asked respondents to list ideas concerning support available for the council and perspectives of the council. Three spaces indicated by A, B, and C were provided. Typically, people completed the *A* response with detail and the comments in B and C dropped off with less and less information. Because the school groups differ greatly in number, the information from the open-ended questions was grouped by parents and teachers, and the grade levels of teachers are not included.

Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses

The open-ended questions 15 through 20 provided an opportunity to capture perspectives about the council in general, behavior of principals, and members in particular. Questions required each person to offer perspectives on the principal and on self.

Principal. In open-ended question 15, survey respondents were asked to list the strengths of the principal working with the council. Both groups provided positive answers and the answers were very similar. Each group listed attributes that are usually associated with good school leaders: organized, prepared, good listener, inclusive, informed, concerned for school issues, facilitative, and open to the ideas of others. Comments from the teachers include: " . . . made you feel your opinion mattered." A parent wrote: " . . . always available for input."

Both parents and teachers indicated that the principal showed concern for the students and student achievement. For example, a parent wrote: "He put achievement of the students as his first priority." A teacher wrote: "I think she had the kids' best interests at heart."

In question 16, the former council members were asked to list weaknesses of the principal in the open-ended A, B, and C format. Here the responses seemed to contradict the list of weaknesses, because members listed strengths directly opposite the weaknesses. However, this may indicate a range of principal skills related to council facilitation across the schools represented or the respondents had different principals in mind. This is only conjecture. On the weaknesses question, the teachers provided more information than the parents. In general, the theme across both groups, teacher and parent, related to control. Both groups described a tendency for the principal to pre-plan too much and guide decision making too much. The following written comments show the view of the principals' behaviors: Teachers: "Sometimes it appeared that the decision had already been made, just need the council vote on it." Parent: " . . . sometimes it seems that the decisions were already made. We discussed items, but I felt sometimes the principal had already made the decision."

Council. In open-ended question 17, the former council members were asked to list three strengths of the council. Both groups responded in a similar manner and indicated that the strength of the council rests with the council members working together. The teachers and the parents commented that all co-members showed a genuine concern for children. Parents: "All have student success as a number one priority." Teachers: "They were kid oriented." One teacher commented that the teacher perspective was represented and that this was a strength of the council. Parents appreciated the involvement with the school and one parent made a comment regarding the importance for teachers and parents to interact.

In question 18, the parents and teachers were asked to write weaknesses of the council in spaces A, B, and C. Both parents and teachers commented again that decision making was controlled by the principal: Parents: "At times the council members were listeners to the principal rather than decision makers." Teachers: "It didn't matter the way the council voted . . . the principal would still make the final decision."

Council Member View of Self. In open-ended questions 19 and 20, council members were asked to reflect on personal strengths and weaknesses as council members. When council members listed personal strengths, in general, all the sections available were filled.

This is a contrast to previous questions when people answered section A but had a tendency to list less or none at all for sections B and C. On question 19, both teachers and parents viewed the recognition of the responsibility to represent their respective groups as a strength. Teachers said: [The council] " . . . provided classroom and non-classroom insight" and " . . . support of the other teachers--they believe I am there to watch over their interests while helping student success." Parents said: [The council provided] " . . . input for parents and teachers." Both parents and teachers listed positive personal behaviors that are important for groups to work well together: listening, communicating well, clarifying ideas, and keeping the interests of the students as primary (focused work).

When asked to list personal weaknesses in question 20, each person appeared to access what could have been done better. While answers were not as prolific as on the strengths, people responded with more complete answers than on questions 15, 16, 17, and 18, and the comments of some members appeared critical of themselves. Individual teachers and parents indicated some personal issues that they wished had been different. Parents: " . . . being intimidated by the principal." " . . . didn't speak up as much as I should have." Teachers: " . . . having trouble handling criticism when following policy" and " . . . sometimes I felt uncomfortable voicing my opinion."

Both teacher and parent comments noted that a lack of knowledge was one personal weakness. Most of the teachers wrote the need to know more about SBDM policies, Kentucky Revised Statutes, special education law, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation standards. While the parent comments indicated the lack of knowledge on a wider range of basic school information: testing, tests, test scores, curriculum, education in Kentucky, and educational acronyms.

Some individual teachers and parents wrote that they should have asked more questions and not hesitated to speak up. Additionally some parents wished that their attendance had been better. One teacher wished that he/she had communicated more with the other teachers about the council meetings.

Perceived Effectiveness of the SBDM Council at School

On the yes/no question number 23, regarding perceived effectiveness of the council the majority (85%) of respondents said they thought their SBDM council was effective. All (100%) high school respondents said it was effective (See Table 2). When asked to indicate effectiveness on a Likert-type scale on question number 29 of their SBDM council for ideas *contributing to student achievement*, less than half (45%) the respondents said that the SBDM council contributes considerably (ratings of 4 or 5 - *much* or *very much*) to student achievement in the school. Fifty-five percent marked *not much* or *some* (ratings of 1, 2, or 3). Middle school respondents were less optimistic (35% of the ratings were 4 or 5) about the contribution of the SBDM council than elementary or high school respondents. Parents and teachers' responses were similar.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of past SBDM council members responding to questions about the effectiveness of the SBDM council

	Level			Group		Total
	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Parents	Teachers	
SBDM effective yes	33/40 (83%)	10/12 (83%)	8/8 (100%)	19/20 (95%)	32/40 (80%)	51/60 (85%)
Contributes to school achievement: Much/very much (4/5)	23/48 (48%)	6/17 (35%)	5/11 (45 %)	12/27 (44%)	22/49 (45%)	34/76 (45%)
Not much/some (1-3)	25/48 (52%)	11/17 (65%)	6/11 (55%)	15/27 (56%)	27/49 (55%)	42/76 (55%)
Scores increased Yes	31/41 (76%)	13/13 (100%)	9/9 (100%)	17/21 (81%)	36/42 (86%)	53/63 (84%)
No	6/41 (15%)	0	0	3/21 (14%)	3/42 (7%)	6/63 (10%)
Stayed the same	3/41 (7%)	0	0	0	3/42 (7%)	3/63 (5%)
Don't know	1/41 (2%)	0	0	1/21 (5%)	0	1/63 (1%)
Usefulness of 4 or 5	28/41 (68%)	8/13 (62%)	6/9 (67%)	18/21 (86%)	24/42 (57%)	42/63 (67%)
Function without SBDM? No	32/35 (91%)	10/11 (91%)	8/8 (100%)	20/21 (95%)	30/33 (91%)	50/54 (93%)
Encourage others to serve: yes	37/39 (95%)	11/12 (92%)	8/8 (100%)	21/21 (100%)	35/38 (92%)	56/59 (95%)
Quality of training Well/very well	31/41 (76%)	8/13 (62%)	8/9 (89%)	16/21 (76%)	31/42 (74%)	47/63 (74%)
Adequacy of info Helpful/very helpful	34/47 (72%)	13/17 (76%)	9/11 (82%)	18/26 (69%)	38/49 (78%)	56/75 (75%)
Familiar with policies? 4 or 5	26/41 (63%)	10/13 (77%)	8/9 (89%)	15/21 (71%)	29/42 (69%)	44/63 (70%)

Middle and high school participants (100%) said their achievement scores had increased since they had been on the council. Less respondents (76%) at the elementary level said their scores had increased; 15% said scores had decreased, and another 7% said scores had stayed the same. Teachers' and parents' responses were similar. When asked to rate the usefulness of the SBDM council, about two-thirds (67%) of respondents rated the council as

useful or very useful. More parents (86%) than teachers rated councils useful than any single school level group (elementary, middle, or high school). Participants were asked if they thought their school could function better without an SBDM council and if they would encourage others to serve on a council. Nearly all respondents said the school functions better with the council (between 91% and 100%), and that they would encourage others to serve on their council (between 92% and 100%). Percentages were similar across all categories.

As introduced above, question 23 asked former council members if they felt the councils were "effective in working with schools to improve student achievement." The open-ended question asked persons who answered *yes* to offer an explanation. The major theme expressed by parents and teachers was that the involvement of all persons concerned for the students made the council effective. Some of the *yes* answers did express the reservation that there must be *buy-in* or positive commitment from the school people and that there should be a focus on student learning. Both teachers and parents indicated that the review of test scores supported student learning. The few people who marked *no* (the council was not effective to improve student learning) felt that the council was removed from other teachers, parents, and from students, which reduced the impact of the council. One teacher commented that the council had no real power.

When people were asked if they would encourage others to serve on councils, a follow-up question asked people to write *why* yes or *why* no. Most people answered *yes*, and both teachers and parents thought council membership was a learning experience. Parent: "The council enables parents to get in-depth knowledge about the school's operations and needs." Teacher: "It's a great chance to better understand how the school operates." Both comments from parents and teachers indicated that individuals in both groups valued the involvement with the school. Parent: "It gives you involvement in your child's education." Teacher: "It's a great way to get involved with your school."

On question 28 respondents were asked to give reasons for answering *yes* or *no* regarding schools functioning effectively without councils. Teachers had more comments than parents, but, in general, the comments from both groups reinforced the importance of active participation from parents and teachers in order to improve the quality of education. Both groups indicated a need for all stakeholders to have a voice in the schools. One person who answered conditionally, indicated that the principal is a key person to make the council effective.

Perceived Training Needs

There were three questions having to do with training for council membership or information members received. More high school respondents (89%) rated the quality of the training they received as 4 or 5 (*well* or *very well*) than middle (62%) or elementary participants (76%) did. Overall, 74% of participants rated the training with *well* or *very well*, and this was about the same for parents and teachers.

Open-ended question number 22 asked people to give suggestions for improving council training. While there was a strong pattern of satisfactory comments regarding the training, some parents and teachers indicated specific needs. Some parents and a few

teachers suggested more information about SBDM responsibilities, roles, and procedures. Parents also suggested training on school testing and school legal issues. One parent suggested that the training be given in non-educator language. More parents than teachers offered suggestions.

Another question was about the adequacy of information received by the respondent. About three-fourths (74%) rated the information they received as 4 or 5 (*helpful* or *very helpful*). Percentages of respondents giving the 4 or 5 rating ranged from 72% for elementary respondents to 82% for high school respondents. More teachers (78%) gave the higher ratings than parents (69%). When asked how familiar the respondent felt with procedures and policies, 89% of high school respondents gave ratings of 4 or 5 (*very familiar*), 77% of middle school participants, and 63% of elementary school participants. Parent and teacher percentages were about the same.

When former council members were asked to list information that would have been helpful, but was not received, there was a pattern across parent and teacher groups regarding a lack of information about SBDM council by-laws and school planning required by the state. Most information needs were about how the school operates. The parent group showed the stronger feelings of comfort with the information provided and some commented: "We had everything in front of us at each meeting" and " . . . can't think of a thing."

The group that had more prior knowledge of how the schools work, the teachers, had specific comments regarding information needs. These needs included: PTO information and legal issue information. Although negative comments were minimal, the negative comments were from the teacher group, for example: " . . . received the information that the principal wanted us to have."

The open-ended responses connected to the structured response questions expand understanding about the council members' experiences during service. Such expanded information provides planning and support guides for school councils.

Discussion

The significance and strength of this project is that it brings to the table some of the positive and negative aspects of one of the Kentucky school reform initiatives, the governance of schools by SBDM councils. The training and support of council members that would enable them to knowledgably perform their role was specifically investigated in two of the six largest school districts in Kentucky.

The open-ended comments offer ideas for training and support. Some suggestions from the information provided by the survey respondents are presented below.

The overall findings from this study suggest that many individual council members were unsure of their role as council members even though they had served at least one term on their school's council and 49% had served two or more terms. Although, most respondents thought their SBDM council was effective, less than half (45%) said that they were effective in contributing to student achievement, which is the state's major charge for councils. These findings bring into question the depth, quality, and appropriateness of the SBDM council training and whether there was adequate follow-up support to enable council members to meet their responsibilities.

People providing training for council members might find that the open-ended responses indicate areas for emphasis. Some comments suggest the inclusion of new material while others would suggest reinforcement of previously presented material.

The responses suggested that in meaningful council training the language of presentation should fit the audience. While most teachers understand acronyms and other educational jargon, most people outside schools do not. Sometimes presenters take for granted that all teachers understand the education references, but in reality, beginning teachers, teachers new to the state, or teachers who have never served on school-wide committees may not understand the jargon. Explanations in language everyone can understand may be helpful to all.

Participants suggested that trainers increase emphasis on the following content: SBDM council policy, responsibilities of council members, council by-laws, basic legal information, testing information, curriculum standards and issues, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) standards, Kentucky Revised Statutes (KRS), and Kentucky Administrative Regulations (KAR). The last three are good examples of how non-educators are left in the dark when acronyms are used. Perhaps, even some teachers do not know what each letter means.

The issues of control exerted by the principal and expressed by both parents and teachers indicate that principals may or may not have appropriate skills for working with community/school groups, especially decision-making groups. At some point, separate from the council training, principals may need to be trained in group decision making strategies, because information from this study indicates that principals are important to council success and that they are perceived by teachers and parents as pre-planning decisions instead of including the council in final decisions affecting the school.

While the teachers and the parents do represent interest groups, these same people must function as a common unit and work together. Principals should probably be trained to plan team building activities and procedures during the school-year to support group identified focus areas and decision making. Comments about feeling intimidated, not being able to voice ideas, feeling uncomfortable speaking out, and having trouble handling criticism should be addressed in beginning, update, or on-going training. The data indicate that generally the current training structure may not be appropriate for preparing councils to govern schools effectively. Training may need to be implemented which would assist individual council members to be more assertive in their efforts to serve effectively. Through training members may be more comfortable in speaking out if they feel decisions have already been made prior to discussion by the council and to consider it their responsibility to voice their ideas about the school without being intimidated by the situation or by an individual. Perhaps initial and update training would have a more positive impact if members of a council were trained together so that common understandings about their role and responsibility and the unique needs of their school could be clearly established. In situations where trust has been nurtured, people will have fewer of these types of feelings about group participation.

In summary, survey respondents seemed to agree on issues of effectiveness and importance of councils. Perhaps those who are willing to serve are people who feel positive about the school and about councils. The most important implication of this research is the

need for people to receive training that prepares them to understand their roles and responsibilities as SBDM council members. Appropriate, continuous training and support appear vital for councils to positively impact student achievement.

Code _____

SURVEY

Former SBDM council member's perception of support for and leadership of school councils

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This project has been reviewed and approved by the Western Kentucky University Human Subjects Review Board.

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1. What group did you represent on the council?
   ____ parents
   ____ teachers

2. At what level(s) did you serve on a council?
   ____ Elementary
   ____ Middle
   ____ High
   ____ Other (please explain)

(Note: If you served at more than one level, please complete the survey for the most current.)

3. Indicate below how long you served on the council at this level.
   ____ Less than one year
   ____ One year
   ____ Two years
   ____ Other

4. Please indicate your gender.
   ____ Male
   ____ Female

5. Below please check the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) initiatives that the school council concentrated on the most during the time that you served on the council.

Elementary Council
   ____ Curriculum Development
   ____ Professional Development
   ____ Assessment and Accountability
   ____ School Based Decision Making
   ____ Primary Program
   ____ Pre-school Program
   ____ Extended School Services
   ____ Family Resources/Youth Services Centers
   ____ Technology
   ____ School Budget
   ____ Personnel
   ____ Use of Space Within the Building
   ____ Extra Curricular Activities

<u>Middle and High School Council</u>
____ Curriculum Development
____ Professional Development
____ Assessment and Accountability
____ School Based Decision Making
____ Extended School Services
____ Family Resources/Youth Services Centers
____ Technology
____ Personnel
____ Use of Space Within the Building
____ Extra Curricular Activities

6. On the scale below indicate the extent to which you feel that your efforts as a council member contributed to student achievement.

    1 .... 2 .... 3 .... 4 5
    Not   Very
    Much   Much

7. On the scale below indicate the overall extent that you were supported in your work on the council.

    1 .... 2 .... 3 .... 4 5
    Not   Very
    Much   Much

8. On the scale below indicate the overall adequacy of the information you received in order to accomplish your job on the council?

    1 .... 2 .... 3 .... 4 5
    Not   Very
    Helpful   Helpful
    At All

9. List information that you should have received but did not.
    a.
    b.
    c.

10. On the scale below indicate how supportive the **principa**l was of the council.

    1 .... 2 .... 3 .... 4 5
    Not   Very
    Helpful   Helpful
    At All

11. On the scale below indicate how supportive the **teachers** were of the council.

        1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
        Not   Very
        Helpful   Helpful
        At All

12. On the scale below indicate how supportive the **parents** were of the council.

        1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
        Not   Very
        Helpful   Helpful
        At All

13. On the scale below indicate how supportive the **community** was of the council.

        1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
        Not   Very
        Helpful   Helpful
        At All

14. On the scale below indicate how supportive the **Central Office Administrators** were of the council.

        1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
        Not   Very
        Helpful   Helpful
        At All

15. If applicable, list three **strengths** of the **principal** in working with the council.
    a.
    b.
    c.

16. If applicable, list three **weaknesses** of the **principal** in working with the council.
    a.
    b.
    c.

17. If applicable, list three **strengths** of the **council.**
    a.
    b.
    c.

18. If applicable, list three **weaknesses** of the **council**.
    a.
    b.
    c.

19. If applicable, what were three of **your <u>strengths</u>** as a council member?
    a.
    b.
    c.

20. If applicable, what were three of **your <u>weaknesses</u>** as a council member?
    a.
    b.
    c.

21. On the scale below indicate how well you were trained to serve on the council.

    1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
    Very   Very
    Poor   Well

22. What suggestions do you have for improving council members training?

23. In general, do you think councils are effective in working with schools to improve student achievement?
    _____ Yes   How?

    _____ No   Why not?

24. Indicate below the status of test scores for your school on the state test during your term on the council?
    _____ Increased   _____ Decreased   _____ Stayed the same _____ Don't know

25. Would you encourage others to serve on the council?
    _____ Yes _____ No
    Why or why not?

26. On the scale below indicate how familiar were you with the council's policies.
    1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
    Not   Very
    Familiar   Familiar
    At All

27. How many years had the school principal served in that position at the time you were on the council? _____ years

28. In your opinion could schools function more efficiently without school councils?
    _____ Yes _____ No
    Why or why not?

29. On the scale below indicate the usefulness and efficiency of school councils in   conducting school business for the purpose of enhancing student achievement?

<div style="text-align:center">

1 ………. 2 ………. 3 ………. 4 ………. 5
Not useful   Very useful
or efficient   and efficient

</div>

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THE SURVEY.

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