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Research REPORT

PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

Final Report of the Parent Participation in School
Improvement Planning Project

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March 11, 2004

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Contents

A. Overview of Project

- 1. Summary of the Project 3
- 2. Review of Research 11

B. Evidence from the Case Studies

- 3. Getting Started; First Round of Data Collection 47
- 4. Gaining Momentum: Second Round of Data Collection 57
- 5. Sustaining Momentum and Running Out Of Steam: Third Round of Data Collection 69
- 6. Looking For Impact: Final Round of Data Collection 81

C. Testing a Model of Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning

- 7. A Framework for Successful Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning 93
- 8. An Empirical Test of the Framework, Summary and Recommendations 101

References 119

Appendix A: Interview Questions

- First Round 131
- Second Round 133
- Third Round 135
- Final Round 137

Appendix B: Survey Items

- Administrators 141
- Teachers 147
- Parents 151

A. Overview of the Project

1. Summary of the Project

Purposes and Methods

This project, to support schools in involving parents in school improvement planning, was initially sponsored by the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) of Ontario. The mandate of the EIC expired in 2001. The Canadian Education Association (CEA) was contracted to conduct a three-year study of the project. Exploring the potential contribution of parent participation to school improvement planning (SIP), results of the study help answer four broad questions:

1. What factors most influence the nature and success of school improvement planning and implementation?
2. What are the most effective ways of involving parents, school councils and the school community in the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans?
3. To what degree, and in what ways, do school improvement plans impact on student achievement and other factors associated with effective schools? and
4. What are the most effective strategies for increasing the involvement of parents in their children's education?

Reviews of prior research, case studies over a three year period in ten schools, and survey data collected from teachers, administrators and parents in 100 Ontario elementary schools provided evidence for the study. This summary provides answers to each of the four research questions using all three sources of evidence and concludes with a series of eight recommendations warranted by that evidence.

Factors Which Most Influence the Nature and Success of School Improvement Planning and Implementation

There was evidence in the literature to suggest that the most powerful factors were principal leadership and the leadership of school improvement (SI) teams. SI teams provide a structure for collaboration among leaders, between teachers and administrators, and when they are included, parents, as well. Evidence from prior research also highlights the importance of school improvement focusing on a small number of manageable goals, and adequate time to work on school improvement initiatives. This literature awards considerable importance to parental roles, as well, but these are largely roles in the home, not the school. There is little reason to believe, from this literature, that parent involvement in school improvement planning would add significant value to the outcomes of school improvement processes for students.

Our case study evidence suggested that the most influential factors impacting on the nature and success of school improvement planning included: principal leadership; the school

leadership team/teacher leadership; stakeholder ownership of the SIP; the content of SIP plans; a process which includes ongoing monitoring and communication; an improvement oriented school culture; adequate support and resources; and parent involvement.

Survey results awarded greatest importance to school leadership – especially the leadership of the principal. Of considerable importance, as well, are out-of-school support (especially important to principals), the quality of SI planning processes, and the content of such plans. The most productive planning processes, according to these data, are inclusive, ongoing and informed by good data. Adequate time must be available for such planning and people should be acknowledged for their part in the process. The most productive content of a school improvement plan is student focused and targeted on achieving a small number of important goals.

In sum, then, key factors associated with successful school improvement across all three sources of data include:

- principal leadership;
- the leadership of teachers, and possibly parents, as members of a school improvement team;
- a small number of manageable improvement goals clearly focused on students;
- data-driven decision-making about the means and ends of school improvement;
- effective implementation of SIP including time to do school improvement work; and
- parent participation in the home.

Involving Parents, School Councils, and the School Community in School Improvement Planning

Little detailed information is available from the literature about the best ways to involve parents and other members of the community in SIP. What can be concluded from such evidence is that at least passive support for a school's improvement efforts is important, especially from the principal's perspective. For schools perceived to be underperforming, parents are capable of exerting considerable political influence on school staffs, senior district administrators and trustees to intervene. Such influence, however, is much more likely among economically advantaged parents through the formation of community networks and their association with non-school professionals. Prior evidence suggests that when parents assume leadership roles on school councils, in close partnership with principals, their influence on both the content and processes of school improvement is considerable.

In the case studies, parents, school councils and the school community were involved in a variety of ways in the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans. In the early stages, parents contributed important information that helped to shape school plans through vehicles such as surveys, interviews and meetings. They participated in school improvement teams and in school councils as partners with teachers and administrators in creating workable plans. School councils served as vehicles for communication about plans and actions, and for approval of project participation and school improvement plans.

During implementation, parents and school councils were instrumental in organizing parent involvement activities. They helped teachers with some of the other school improvement initiatives as well. In one case, a parent ran a highly successful SIP project on her own. In the main, parents and school councils played a support role during implementation. During the monitoring/revision stage of SIP, some school improvement teams and school councils in which parents were members, played a monitoring role.

While our case study data suggest quite promising effects of active parent involvement in SIP, our survey results conform more closely to prior evidence about parent roles. Parent participation was related, in our survey results, to the quality of implementation processes, as well as both perceived student outcomes and such positive outcomes for parents as a greater understanding of the schools programs. But parents themselves were more positive about participation in their child's learning at home than at school and parent leadership was rated lowest (although still quite positively) among all three sources of leadership for school improvement planning.

We interpret the results of our three sources of evidence as generally warranting the continued efforts of schools to involve parents in their children's education both at home and at school. Helping parents productively engage their children in learning at home should remain a priority, however. This is the case because of the strength of the evidence indicating powerful effects of such involvement and because this is a more feasible option for the significant proportion of parents who, for example, have very little time left over from demanding work schedules to be in schools.

Extent and Nature of Effects of School Improvement Plans on Student Achievement and Other Factors Associated with Effective Schools

A long-standing and still quite active body of research has devoted itself to uncovering the characteristics of effective schools. And while the results of such efforts are regularly subjected to critical scrutiny, they stand in sharp contrast to the meagre body of evidence about the effects of school improvement planning. This is not to say that we know little about how to create effective schools; but it is to say that school improvement planning as we typically view it has not emerged as one of the most promising strategies.

The most productive initiatives for improving schools according to the evidence include, for example, creating professional learning communities, building collaboration cultures, providing school-based professional development for teachers, involving teachers in action research, introducing high stakes student assessment procedures, and implementing comprehensive school reform programs.

So prior research offers no reason for assuming that school improvement planning ought to result in student achievement gains, unless, of course, one expands the meaning of SIP to include the strategies just listed. The design of our case studies did not address the relationship between planning and achievement directly. That evidence did, however, suggest that when school improvement plans were focused on student learning, and when those plans were well

implemented, principals, parents and teachers perceived them to have a positive impact on student learning.

The degree to which SIP impacts on student achievement, using direct measures of such achievement, was tested by the survey portion of our research. Two percent of the variation in student achievement gains across the schools in our sample was explained by the combined effects of all variables in our framework. Acknowledging the limits of our measure of student achievement gains, this is a modest amount of explained variation, to say the least. Comparing this modest amount of explained variation with the relatively large proportion of variation in perceived student outcomes (51%) indicates just how easy it is to underestimate the difficulty and complexity of improving student achievement on a school-wide basis.

These results also raise doubts about the common practice in Ontario, as in many other jurisdictions, of encouraging schools to use the results of province- or state-wide achievement tests as a stimulus for school improvement planning. Such encouragement flies in the face of not just one, but two, serious problems. The first problem is, as our study suggests, weak evidence that school improvement planning, at least carried out in a mechanistic way, is a productive consumer of a school's scarce improvement energies. The second problem is that many Ontario schools, elementary schools in particular, are relying on their EQAO results as the main, if not the only, source of information about goals that should be set for school improvement. EQAO tests are of very high quality compared to tests of this sort in many other provinces and states. Unfortunately, the reliability of the results at the school level is unknown, a problem common in other jurisdictions, as well.

We use the term “unreliable” in the technical sense to mean that the results of giving such tests to students in a school this week might well differ significantly from results achieved using the same tests in that same school next week. As the numbers of students for which results are reported gets smaller, the effects on the results of unknown or unanticipated factors over which the school may have no control increases. It is not hard to imagine, then, a school staff devoting enormous energies to a weak improvement strategy focused on the wrong goals. It is time to rethink the paradigm.

The most obvious rejoinders to our call for rethinking the paradigm are twofold. First, some will argue that a good school improvement plan can encompass, as strategies, many of the more powerful improvement initiatives, examples of which we have mentioned. We argue, in response, that by allowing SIP to be the organizing concept for improvement we perpetuate a linear, superficial way of thinking about the improvement problem, whereas powerful solutions are more likely to be non-linear, indirect and embedded deeply in the “guts” of a school's anatomy – its culture, its reward structures, the dispositions and motivations of those attracted to it as a workplace, and the basic “technologies” it uses to accomplish its goals.

A second rejoinder to our call for rethinking the paradigm concerns the unreliability of most province- or state-wide achievement data at the school level. In acknowledgement of such unreliability, schools are routinely advised to supplement such data with their own measures and estimates – to use such data as “just one source” of information on which to base their school improvement goals. This advice is problematic on several grounds. First, as our case study

schools illustrate so well, schools rarely heed this advice. Perhaps this is because of the perceived authority associated with the province's data. Perhaps it is because of the public nature of provincial results and the stakes for school staff in not performing well. Perhaps it is because schools lack the resources or capacities (or both) for collecting such data. Second, the most likely source of additional data about student achievement and gains in such achievement is teachers' own estimates. Just how accurate such estimates are likely to be has been the subject of debate for many years. But at least our survey results indicated that teachers' estimates can be dramatically different from the results of direct measures; the question of which is more accurate remains to be answered.

Strategies for Increasing the Involvement of Parents in Their Children's Education

Prior research concerning this question offers many suggestions for involving parents especially in the home but also at school including:

- school recognition of the value of parent involvement in all its different forms;
- school vision, programs and plans that include parents as partners;
- school leadership that encourages parent involvement;
- school climate that welcomes parents; and
- school communication that is open, on going and invitational.

Parent involvement in the home is increased through such specific initiatives as:

- positive communication with parents and families about their role in their children's education;
- specific instructions from teachers about how parents can help their children at home;
- subject-specific school-family training and collaboration eg. workshops and home visits;
- phone calls and visits, translation of written materials, and enlisting the aid of community liaisons or family members; and
- requests from children to their parents for their involvement.

Strategies evident in prior research for involving parents more extensively in schools include:

- information to parents on ways they can be involved at the school;
- personal invitations from principals, teachers, parents and children to parents about participating in specific activities;
- training and support for school staff and parents;
- develop clear understanding of roles, responsibilities and boundaries regarding group decision-making;
- structure school committees in ways that will encourage parent involvement eg.
- avoid jargon that would cause parent discomfort; and

- recruit hard-to-reach parents by providing childcare, transportation, and translation.

In case study schools, parent involvement was an important part of the school improvement process. Parents were encouraged to participate in many ways. While parents were invited to engage in activities in which they might not have had previous experience, an effort was made to make them feel comfortable with their level and type of involvement. Parents who were newer to schools, who were less familiar with the working language of schools, and who were less educated were drawn to social activities. Then, schools tried to build on this involvement by inviting parents into other school-related activities. In some schools more parents became engaged in student learning initiatives. Parents who had experience with schools and who were better educated became involved in school councils, SIP teams, and in decision-making roles. Additional strategies that were utilized by schools included: principals, teachers and parents issued personal invitations to parents; special events, curriculum nights and reporting days were scheduled; varied communication methods were employed eg. teachers made good new calls home; teachers sent home learning activities with specific instruction for parents; parents' needs and responsibilities were accounted for eg. parents' schedules and comfort levels with the content of discussions were considered in meeting design; and parents were recognized for their contributions.

Our survey evidence is not a direct source of information about strategies for increasing parent involvement. However, taken together, evidence about the importance of data-driven decision-making and parent participation in school improvement planning also suggest a direction for schools that is underutilized in many schools. One need not have active parent participation on a school improvement team or school council in order to understand and account for parent views and preferences. Those parents who are active in such direct ways do not necessarily "represent" the views of the entire school's parent population. More systematically collecting representative data about parent views and preferences through focus groups, targeted interviews, phone surveys and the like is a strategy with considerable promise; it gives voice to those parents who are largely disempowered by their own past experiences with school, competing obligations, reluctance to challenge those in positions of authority, or lack of knowledge about how to exert influence on behalf of their children. As some evidence now suggests, for example, school councils are sometimes dominated by parents whose powerful advocacy for the welfare of their own children can perpetuate inequities for others.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For policy makers, this evidence strongly recommends:

1. Devoting considerably more attention to enabling parents' direct involvement in the education of their children.
2. Including among the tasks for which districts are held accountable, the development of frameworks and tools for schools to use in regularly collecting representative evidence from family and community members about local priorities for the school's attention.
3. Have the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) clarify the reliability of its test results at the school level and align the uses recommended for these data with the purposes they are technically capable of serving.

For district and school practitioners, the evidence strongly recommends that:

4. Parent and community views about district and school priorities be assessed using procedures capable of representing the range and depth of views of parents and the community as a whole.
5. Rely much more extensively than is currently typical, on sources of data about school priorities in addition to the results of EQAO tests.
6. For purposes of improving the quality of education for students, rely much less than presently is the case on linear or mechanistic models of school planning and much more on approaches to improvement for which there is better evidence of significant effects (e.g. creation of professional learning communities, leadership development).

For parents, evidence from the study suggests that:

7. They devote most of the time they have available for children's' schooling (their own and other's) to directly assisting children master the school curriculum.
8. When they feel strongly that changes in the school are required, approach school and district leaders in coordination with other like-minded parents, to request/insist on such change.

2. Review of Research

Introduction

The review begins with some discussion of the meaning of “school improvement” and is followed with an overview of the literature on parent involvement in schools. Next, we outline six different orientations to school improvement and identify the implications of each for parent participation. Of the six different approaches to school improvement, one best represents the orientation recommended by the government to the schools included in our case studies (school improvement planning). So in the fourth part of this section, we explore more extensively the empirical and theoretical literatures relevant to this approach: we ask what does this approach typically involve, and is there compelling evidence of its impact on the school organization and on students? Finally, we summarize evidence concerning parents’ participation in this form of school improvement, in particular.

The Meaning of School Improvement

The school improvement literature by now is vast in quantity and varied in focus. This is because, as van Velzun et al (1985) note:

School improvement always seems to have been needed and discussed in modern societies. As long as schools for the total population have existed, there have been efforts to change the school to make it function in a better way (1985, p. 266).

Many terms are used interchangeably in reference to school improvement, for example: change (doing something differently but not necessarily better); implementation (accomplishing a set of pre-determined goals); and reform (when the goals are especially broad). So we begin by asking, “What is the meaning of school improvement? Based on a wide-ranging review of literature, those involved in an international research effort sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in the early ‘80s suggested that school improvement could be usefully defined as “...a systematic sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively (van Velzun et al, 1985). Using the term “school development”, Louis, Toole, & Hargreaves add that the process “... occurs as a result of the interacting influences of three sources of change – that which is deliberately planned, that which is naturally occurring in the life cycle of organizations, and that which is unforeseen or unknowable in advance “ (1999, p. 258).

School improvement, defined in this way, acknowledges that the outcomes of actions, most obviously the product of a planful process, are often both more and less than what that planful process anticipated. This is because in most educational jurisdictions there are multiple sources

or policy levers aimed at stimulating school improvement and these sources often are based on different and sometimes conflicting assumptions about how and where school improvement might be initiated. New government policies, district priorities, community interest groups, parent beliefs and values, global trends – these are examples of sources outside the educational establishment and individual school that often provoke specific improvement efforts by schools or, at minimum, demand accommodation when schools initiate their own improvement efforts. Such external forces are important to acknowledge at the outset since they play a central role in most of the alternative approaches to school improvement reviewed in this paper.

Parent Involvement in Schools

Parents, as we shall see in this section, play many roles in schools, only one of which is to participate directly in school improvement planning. This part of our review considers the case for parent involvement in schools, the forms such participation may take and their effects, and specifically, the role of parents in types of school improvement planning engaged in by the case schools in our study.

The Case for Parent Involvement in Schools

Closer and more extensive relationships between districts, schools and their communities is a central pillar of many school improvement initiatives (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1993). Many reasons have been advanced for involving parents in the education of their children. Some advocates claim, for example, that parents have a “right” to participate in decisions affecting their children’s education, while others argue that such involvement increases parents’ feelings of efficacy. Educators also are assumed to benefit from the improved home-school relations and the provision of needed additional resources flowing from parent participation. Most important for our purposes, however, results of a large corpus of research suggest that at least some forms of parent involvement explain a significant amount of the variation in the learning of students.

Research on the relationship between parent involvement and student outcomes has been extensive and sustained since Coleman et al’s seminal study in 1966. Evidence from this study suggested that parent and family characteristics explain considerably more of the variation in student achievement across schools than do school variables. Parents and families were found to have significant effects on children’s attitudes towards achievement, as well.

Capturing the evidence, which accumulated over the next 20 years on this matter, Henderson produced two annotated bibliographies of research examining the consequences of parent involvement on student achievement. In *The Evidence Grows* Henderson’s (1981) analysis of 35 studies demonstrated consistently positive effects on student achievement of various forms of parent involvement. From her subsequent review of 49 empirical studies, Henderson (1987, p. 9-10) concluded that:

- The family provides the child’s primary educational environment;
- Involving parents in their children’s formal education improves student
- achievement;

- Parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, long-lasting,
- and well planned;
- The benefits of parent involvement are not confined to early childhood or the elementary level. There are strong effects from involving parents continuously throughout high school, as well;
- Involving parents in their own children's education at home is not enough. To ensure the quality of schools as institutions serving the community, parents must be involved at all levels in the school;
- Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when schools involve parents. Parents do not have to be well educated to help;
- We cannot look at the school and the home in isolation from one another; we must see how they interconnect with each other and with the world at large.

Research about parent involvement expanded quickly after Henderson's 1987 report and by 1994 Henderson and Berla had access to a total of 65 studies for review. With a new emphasis on families rather than just parents, these studies inquired about how programs, other types of interventions, and family processes affected children's learning. Results suggested that parent and family involvement is not only crucial to children's attitudes and learning but is beneficial to schools, as well.

Results from research over the past three decades, in sum, are unambiguous about the significant contribution that parent involvement in school makes to students' academic achievement and other important outcomes (see also Fullan, 1997; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Rich 1985; Sattes, 1985; Snow et al, 1991; and Walberg, 1984). In Epstein's words:

The evidence is clear that parental encouragement, activities, interest at home and participation at schools and classrooms affect their children's achievement, attitudes and aspirations even after student ability and family socioeconomic status are taken into account. Students gain in personal and academic development if their families emphasize schooling, let their children know they do, and do so continually over the years. (1987, p.120.)

Forms of Parent Involvement

Efforts to describe different forms of parent involvement in schools often reflect a continuum ranging from "traditional" to "radical". At the traditional end are quite limited forms of parent involvement which assume that educators are autonomously in charge of the school and fully responsible for the education of their students; the role of parents is to be supportive of school decisions and actions. Since parents have no right to infringe on the autonomy of school professionals, the most which can transpire between them is communication. At the radical end of the continuum, in contrast, are forms of school-parent/community relationships which blur the boundaries between home and school by assuming that parents have levels of power, influence, and responsibility for the education of children equal to or greater than the school.

Roughly reflecting this traditional to radical continuum, several classifications or taxonomies of types of parent involvement in schools have been described in the literature. Perhaps the most frequently cited taxonomy belongs to Epstein (Epstein, 1995; Sanders & Epstein, 1998) who suggests six more or less productive forms of involvement:

- Parenting: helping each home to create an environment which supports children's learning such as providing advice on reading to one's child, helping with homework, and the like;
 - Communicating: developing two-way, jargon-free, meaningful communications about the school's programs, expectations and student progress;
 - Volunteering: recruiting and supporting parental and community help in school;
 - Learning at home: helping parents support their child's learning at home by helping with homework and other school-related activities;
 - Decision making: involving parents in school planning teams and other forums for school-wide decision making;
 - Collaboration with the community: integrating appropriate resources and services from the community to support families and pupils.
- While no "radical" forms of parent involvement are included in this classification system, all forms are at least a step removed from the traditional end of the involvement spectrum described above, with communication the least radical.

Swap (1993) describes a threefold classification of school/parent relationships or models including the Protective Model, the School-to-Home Transmission Model, and the Curriculum Enrichment Model. The Protective Model, according to Swap, is the most common form of parent participation found in schools. Reflecting the traditional end of the continuum described above, this model aims to keep parent and educator roles and activities separated in order to reduce the conflict between them. Such conflict might be seen as a natural consequence of the difference in interests between parents and educators since parents are concerned with their own children while teachers are focused on all the children in their care. This model is based on three underlying assumptions: parents delegate to the school the responsibility of educating their children; parents hold school personnel accountable for the results; and educators accept this delegation of responsibility. Contact and authentic communication between the schools and parents is kept to a minimum through such traditional vehicles as open houses and report cards. While unwanted parent interference is avoided in this form of participation, conflicts are allowed to escalate, potential parental contributions to student achievement may not be realized, and the full resources of parents in support of the school are not tapped.

Swap's second model, School-to-Home Transmission, aims to engage parents in a support role that will help meet the school's objectives. Including aspects of all but the last (collaboration with the community) of Epstein's categories, this model assumes that:

- children's achievement is fostered by continuity of expectations and values between home and school;
- school personnel should identify the values and practices outside school that contribute to school success;

- parents should endorse the importance of schooling, reinforce school expectations at home, provide conditions at home that nurture development and support school success, and ensure that the child meets minimum academic and social requirements (Swap, 1993, p. 30).

According to this model, parents help their children succeed in the home setting by providing an environment that supports learning and by helping with homework. Parents also participate at school in ways that the school decides will be useful, for example: providing materials for school; assisting with class trips; participating in school functions; and attending advisory meetings (although their role would be subordinate to teachers or administrators). While this model acknowledges the important contribution of parents to student growth evident in the research, it does not capitalize on the full resources of parents, families and communities. Nor does it provide an equitable education for all students. Schools represent and transmit the dominate values and culture of the society in which they are situated; therefore, minority and poor students are at a disadvantage compared to mainstream students (Comer, 1980; Ogbu, 1990; Valencia, 1997). These groups of students may not be as prepared for school success for reasons related to their culture, language, families or economic circumstances.

Valencia (1997) maintains that this category of parent involvement is rife with “deficit thinking” on the part of school personnel and, as a consequence, harms the chances of minority and disadvantaged students, deficit thinking includes blaming the victims and their families for failures, rather than correcting problems associated with societal or educational systems and structures.

Swap’s (1993) third model, Curriculum Enrichment (and a variation proposed by Ogbu (1990) called the Multicultural Model), has no direct counterpart in Epstein’s categories. According to this model, parents and other community members are invited to contribute to the curriculum. This approach involves more than just a superficial sharing of information; it requires educators and families, working together, to adjust the curriculum so that it reflects community values, views and assets. Families and schools, it is assumed, will benefit from the interaction, as mutual understanding is increased and as the rich resources of the community are utilized. This model seems likely to avoid the deficit thinking Valencia (1997) associated with School-to-Home Transmission forms of participation. But some argue that it is very time-consuming to use and that integrating multiple perspectives is a exceedingly complex task. Furthermore, arriving at a consensus about whether the curriculum should be changed to reflect different cultures and voices also is likely to be difficult.

At the most radical end of the involvement continuum, and not part of either the Swap or Epstein classifications, is the Political Activist Model (Dehli & Januario, 1994; Levin & Young, 1994; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). This model envisions forms of parent participation in schools that challenge old paradigms and power relationships as parents push for change. There are many possible reasons for such activism on the part of parents; dissatisfaction with existing policies and practices, concerns about inequity, frustration with school mediocrity, and anger over the ill treatment of children are examples. Prodded into action by such conditions, parents may individually or collectively decide to “take on” the system through such activities as

lobbying, researching issues, networking with other concerned parents, and public relations exercises to raise awareness about their views. While this approach may succeed in bringing about some changes, it can be counterproductive when it increases conflict and discourages communication among stakeholders.

A final form of parent participation to be described here, the Partnership Model, sits at the mid-point between traditional and radical alternatives. When guided by this model, families, schools and communities work together to ensure the success of students. Much advocacy for parent involvement today promotes this style of involvement. However, “partnership” may be defined and implemented in different ways. Typically, parents are involved in many ways and more fully than in previously noted models.

To this point, our review provided evidence attesting to the important contribution parents make to their children’s success at school and the range of forms that participation can take. There are a wide variety of variables that influence the nature and extent of that participation, variables we turn to now: these are factors that affect parent involvement, in general, and their involvement in school improvement efforts, in particular.

A parent’s decision to be involved in educational matters may be influenced by a complex set of factors and not all of these are under the control of schools. Eccles & Harold (1993) and Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1995) have formulated models that attempt to explain influences on parent involvement and their relationship to student outcomes.

Eccles & Harold (1993) are proponents of parent involvement and its positive effect on child outcomes. However, they note that parents are not as involved, as they would like to be or as teachers would like them to be. They maintain there are numerous factors that determine the participation of parents. They developed a framework for thinking about the different factors which might serve to foster or to hinder participation and which, in turn, affect student outcomes. In their “Model of Influence on Parent Involvement and Child Outcomes”, Eccles & Harold present “exogenous” variables that have an overall effect on parent involvement such as characteristics of the parent, family, neighborhood, child, teacher, and school (p. 571). They zero in on the importance of teacher and parent beliefs and practices and link these to child outcomes. The model is not meant to portray a simple cause and effect relationship but to demonstrate the complexity of the matter.

By delving more deeply into the possible influences, both the opportunities for and the barriers to involving parents in their children’s education become apparent. For example, many parents work long hours to provide for their families, which may mean they have less time and energy to devote to their children’s education. If teachers believe that parents are too busy to help at school or at home, they may be reluctant to initiate requests for participation. However, working parents may be waiting for specific invitations or instructions about working with their children. So lack of communication on the part of teachers may be interpreted as a signal to parents that they do not need to be involved or that it is the role of teachers only to be concerned with educational matters. These beliefs and practices could result in reduced student achievement. However, if teachers take into account that many parents want to be involved with their children even though they may be working long hours and they might have difficulty

coming to the school building, they might suggest some direct instructional activities that can be undertaken at home. This may have a positive effect on student outcomes. In planning parent involvement strategies, it is imperative to consider the influences that might act as opportunities or barriers to involvement.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) built on the work of Eccles and Harold (1993) but narrow the scope of their discussion to the specific variables that, from the parent's point of view, would be important for involvement and that would serve as possible intervention points for educators. They sought to address three key questions: "1) Why do parents become involved?; 2) How they choose specific involvement forms?; and 3) How does their involvement influence outcomes?" (p. 312). While they do not dismiss the importance of social capital, they state that variables related to social status do not adequately answer the three questions. To address the first question, they submit that there are three main reasons that parents become involved: "1) their personal construction of the parental role; 2) their personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school; and 3) their reaction to the opportunities and demand characteristics presented by both their children and their children's schools" (p. 313). If parents believe they have a role to play in their children's education, if parents feel competent about their ability, knowledge and skills, and if parents think that their involvement is needed and desired by their child and by the school, then parents will likely become involved in some fashion. However, the choice of type and level of involvement is affected by other matters.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) maintain the following three key variables will influence parents' choice of involvement activity: "specific domains of the parent's self-perceived skills and knowledge; the mix of employment and other family demands experienced by the parent; and specific invitations, demands and opportunities presented by the child and the child's school" (p. 317). This suggests that parents will likely choose to participate in activities in which they think they will be successful, for which they will have the time and energy, and for which their child or the school has indicated their contribution would be welcome. In the case of involvement in decision-making on school improvement, this model would imply that parents would need to feel that they had the knowledge and ability to participate effectively, that they would be able to schedule the time into their agenda and that they would be encouraged to attend, most probably, by the principal. The authors continue their argument by making linkages between parent involvement and children's educational outcomes through three primary mechanisms: "modeling, reinforcement, and direct instruction" (p. 319). However, whether parent involvement will successfully impact on student achievement may be affected by parents' "selection and use of developmentally appropriate involvement strategies and activities, and the fit between the parent's activities and the school's expectations for parental involvement" (p. 322).

This section presented an overview of the many factors that influence parent involvement and how these link to student outcomes. Additional factors key to parent involvement in decision-making processes are identified in subsequent sections of this review.

Alternative Approaches to School Improvement

This section describes six approaches to school improvement and the specific forms of parent involvement called for, or implied, by each. The first three of these approaches include the creation of markets, school restructuring, and professional approaches best illustrated by the standards-setting movement. Conceiving of these as alternative models of governance (governance approaches to school improvement, from our perspective), Boyd argues that they are based on competing and “quite divergent logics”. And, as he and others have pointed out (e.g., Adams & Kirst, 1999), “these divergent logics sometimes are combined in a single multifaceted policy ‘package’ (1998, p. 353). Such eclecticism in approaches to school improvement is a mixed blessing. While combining the strengths of several approaches may offer greater leverage for change, it has the more probable consequence of seeding improvement efforts with incoherence and confusion.

The three remaining approaches described in this section are strategic or development planning, whole school designs, and capacity building. Rather than creating incoherence and confusion in the company of other approaches, however, these approaches can readily serve as components of the governance approaches, as tools for accomplishing their goals. They may also stand alone, although it has become increasingly rare to see them used in this way.

Market Approaches to School Improvement

“New Right” (Marchak, 1993), “Third Way” (Giddens, 1998), and closely related political ideologies are largely responsible for this approach to school improvement. Sometimes referred to as the “exit option”, this approach increases the competition for students faced by schools. It is an especially prominent approach currently, versions of it are evident in several European countries, Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia and parts of Asia, for example. Specific “improvement strategies”, based on increasing competition among schools for student-clients, include allowing school choice by opening boundaries within and across school systems, school privatization plans, and the creation of charter schools, magnet schools, academies and other specialized educational facilities. Competition also is increased by altering the basis for school funding so that money follows students (e.g., vouchers, tuition tax credits), and by publicly ranking schools based on aggregated student achievement scores. These tools are often used in combination.

The common thread binding together these different tools for increasing competition is a belief that schools are unresponsive, bureaucratic, and monopolistic (Lee, 1993). Such organizations are assumed, by advocates of this approach, to have little need to be responsive to pressure from their clients because they are not likely to lose them. In relation to schools, this means that they will come to view their major task as offering programs that they believe are good for their clients. Such organizations, it is argued, seek efficiency on their own terms and are prone to view clients as objects to be treated rather than customers to be served.

Advocates of this approach to school improvement (e.g., Chubb & Moe, 1990) hold a series of assumptions about how such competition is likely to result in greater student achievement. First, increased competition allows parents and students to select schools with which they are more satisfied and which better meet their educational needs. Second, parents who are more satisfied with their child's school provide greater support to that school and to their child's learning. Third, students are likely to be more engaged when their own learning styles are matched to that of a particular school. Fourth, when teachers have chosen their work settings and have been active in designing their own schools' programs, they will be more committed to implementing those programs effectively. Finally, all of these outcomes will combine to increase student achievement, attendance, and educational attainment (Elmore, 1990; Raywid, 1992). At the root of this approach to school improvement is the belief that changing the incentive system for schools is sufficient to cause them to learn how to carry out their work more effectively.

Market approaches to school improvement assume an ideal set of responses from schools (Kerchner, 1988). Of course, having a good "product" to sell is the first order of business. Schools are expected to market their schools effectively, develop good customer/client relations, and monitor "customer" (student and parent) satisfaction. To prosper in such contexts, schools continuously redesign themselves in response to fast changing market conditions. They collect data about competitors' services and prices and find niches for themselves. They have exceptional levels of clarity about their missions because these missions are viewed as a central criterion in parent and student choices.

This brief review suggests, most obviously, that schools implementing market solutions in truly competitive environments will need to include, in their school improvement planning, marketing and entrepreneurial initiatives to attract both clients and resources. By themselves, however, such activities do not acknowledge the growing evidence that market approaches to school improvement can be, and usually are, highly inequitable (Shaper & Harman, 1991; Hughes & Launder, 1999; Lee, 1993). So schools in these competitive environments are likely to be under additional pressure to include, as part of their improvement plans, ensuring access for children and families from diverse and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bauch & Goldring, 1995).

Also implied in this review is a judicious consumer form of parent participation in schools, a form not well represented in the classification systems discussed above. This form of consumerism entails searching out and interpreting information about the quality of available schools and identifying the school that seems to be the best match for one's child. With such a decision made, parents also are expected to do whatever is required to enroll their child into the school of choice. If the school of choice is some distance from home, this may entail also arranging for their child's daily transportation or moving one's home closer to the chosen school.

Restructuring Approaches to School Improvement

In the private sector, restructuring is typically associated with downsizing and the loss of jobs, as well as some form of reorganization. School restructuring rarely has meant loss of jobs. But it has almost always included, as a centrepiece, the implementation of some form of decentralized decision-making or site-based management (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998; Murphy & Hallinger, 1993). As an approach to school improvement, this form of restructuring is intended to lay the foundation for collaboration which, in turn, is believed to be a “winning condition” for shared efforts to improve practice (Pounder, 1998). Murphy elaborates:

“Proponents of devolution believe that decentralized units increase knowledge about, access to, and participation in governance; make organizations easier to change; and prevent undue consolidation of power at geographically distant locations and hierarchically remote organizational levels. Lurking slightly in the background is the belief that increased responsiveness and accountability will result in more effective and efficient internal operations and the development of better products or delivery of service” (1991, p. 1-2).

Our analysis of restructuring approaches to school improvement will be limited to site-based management of which there are three distinct types; community control, administrative control, and professional control (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

Community control. As an approach to school improvement, this form of decentralization is sometimes referred to as the “voice option” since it aims to increase the influence of those who are not heard, or at least not much listened to, in the context of typical school governance structures (e.g., Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1993). This is closest to the form of site-based management evident in Ontario at the present time, even though community members have only been awarded advisory powers.

The basic assumption giving rise to this form of site-based management is that the curriculum of the school ought to directly reflect the values and preferences of parents and the local community (Ornstein, 1983). School professionals, it is claimed, typically are not as responsive to such local values and preferences as they ought to be. Their responsiveness is greatly increased, however, when the power to make decisions about curriculum, budget, personnel and, increasingly, school improvement processes, is in the hands of the parent/community constituents of the school. School councils in which parent/community constituents have a majority of the membership are the primary vehicles through which to exercise such power. Decision-maker is the conception of parent participation associated with this form of restructuring, a category included in Epstein’s taxonomy.

Administrator control. Devolution of decision making, however, is sometimes rooted in a broader reform strategy for public institutions, which Peters has referred to as “new managerialism”. According to Peters, new managerialism “...emphasizes decentralization, deregulation and delegation” (1992, p. 269). In countries such as New Zealand and Australia where school reform has been substantially influenced by the philosophy of new managerialism, creating more efficient and cost effective school administrative structures is a second central goal

for devolution. Typically, this goal is pursued through the implementation of a form of site-based management that increases school-site administrators' accountability to the central district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources. These efficiencies are to be realized by giving local school administrators authority over such key decision areas as budget, physical plant, personnel, and curriculum.

Advocates of this form of site-based management reason that such authority, in combination with the incentive to make the best use of resources, will improve schools by getting more of the resources of the school into the direct service of students. To assist in accomplishing this objective, the principal may consult informally with teachers, parents, students or community representatives. School councils are typically established to advise the principal, but with membership at the discretion of the principal. Parents may be asked for input or be asked to provide the school with information from time to time, but have a marginal role to play in this form of decentralization.

Professional control. Professional control site-based management increases the power of teachers in school decision making while also holding teachers more directly accountable for the school's effects on students. The goal of this form of site-based management is to make better use of teachers' knowledge for purposes of school improvement.

Basic to a professional control model of site-based management is the assumption that professionals closest to the student have the most relevant knowledge for making school improvement decisions (Hess, 1991), and that full participation in the decision-making process will increase their commitment to implementing whatever decisions are made. Participatory democracy, allowing employees greater decision-making power, is also presumed to lead to greater efficiency, effectiveness and better outcomes (Clune & Witte, 1988). School councils associated with this form of site-based management typically have decision-making power and, while many groups are often represented, teachers have the largest proportion of members.

The participation of parents in this form of site-based management falls squarely on the traditional end of the traditional-to-radical continuum described in the introduction to this section; it is not likely to be much different from the forms of participation that occur under administrator control forms of site-based management. School professionals are assumed to be the main repositories of the knowledge and skill needed for meaningful school improvement. This form of site-based management admits parent participation in schools for purposes such as fund raising, attending parent nights, and receiving information about school affairs, for example. But it excludes parents from playing more than an incidental role in school improvement.

In sum, decentralization and site-based management is a widespread approach to school improvement, and experience with it is relatively long-standing. Considerable empirical evidence suggests, however, that by itself it has made a disappointing contribution to school improvement (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). In those exceptional cases where school improvement processes have been successful, school leaders have adopted a supportive leadership role themselves, nurtured leadership on the part of others, including parents, and strongly encouraged councils to

adopt a capacity-building agenda (Beck & Murphy, 1998). These principals have actively encouraged the sharing of power formerly exercised by the principal (Tanner & Stone, 1998).

When parent-dominated school councils are part of decentralization and parents are involved in school improvement planning, principals often provide leadership in respect to both internal and external processes associated with councils. Internally, principals often find themselves setting the agenda, providing information to other council members, assisting council decision making, and developing a close working relationship with the council chair. Externally, principals often act as strong, active supporters of their school councils, communicating with all stakeholders about council activities, and promoting the value of councils for the work of school staffs (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Parker & Leithwood, 2002).

Standard-based Approaches to School Improvement

In the traditional professions, standards-based initiatives emphasize heavy control of entry to the profession by government, with responsibility for subsequent monitoring of accountability turned over to members of the profession itself (e.g., colleges of physicians, lawyers' bar associations). Standards-based approaches to school improvement assume that professional practice is a preeminent explanation for school effectiveness: classroom instructional practices and school leadership practices have become the primary focus of the professional standards movement which set out to define such practices beginning in the US, for example, in the early 1980's.

Different products of the standards movement are available by now as the basis for the licensure of entry-level teachers (e.g., INTASC's Model Standards for Beginning Teacher Licensing, Assessment and Development) and school administrators (e.g., State of Connecticut Department of Education), as well as for recognizing advanced levels of teaching (e.g. The National Policy Board for Teaching Standards), and school administrator performance (e.g., Education Queensland's "Standards Framework for Leaders"). The Ontario College of Teachers recently has developed its own standards for teaching, soon to be followed by standards for administrators.

This approach is almost always found in the company of other approaches to school improvement that may or may not imagine a significant role for parents in school improvement. By itself, however, the standards approach to school improvement does not address the role of parents except insofar as specific standards stipulate, as best practice, that teachers and administrators work in collaboration with parents, or call for some other form of parent participation in the work of teaching and school leadership, which they often do.

Strategic or Development Planning Approaches to School Improvement

This approach to school improvement includes systematic efforts to create more goal-oriented, efficient, and effective schools by introducing more rational planning procedures. It is a widely used approach to school improvement in Ontario, most obviously framing the research being undertaken in the Parents Participation In School Improvement Planning project. As in Ontario,

this approach to school improvement is usually one component of a more comprehensive set of district or provincial/state initiatives. For example, in Ontario the province-wide achievement testing carried out annually in grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 provides information about student achievement intended as one source of information for schools to use when identifying the goals and priorities for their school improvement plans.

The main assumption underlying this approach is that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with current school structures. The effectiveness and efficiency of schools will be improved, however, as they become more strategic in their choices of goals, and more planful and data-driven about the means used to accomplish those goals. This approach encompasses a variety of procedures for “strategic planning”, especially at the district level, as well as multiple procedures for school-level planning (see the states of Illinois, Florida, and Missouri, for example), school development planning (Giles, 1997), and monitoring progress (e.g., the accountability reviews managed by New Zealand’s Education Review Office).

Based on a wide-ranging review of literature, Leithwood, Aitken & Jantzi (2000) concluded that productive school improvement planning:

- Captures relevant information possessed by all appropriate stakeholders;
- Includes a systematic review of the school’s current status and identifies areas in which the school is and is not meeting current needs of stakeholders, especially with respect to student outcomes;
- Encourages collaboration and helps generate high levels of understanding and support among all stakeholder groups, for the planning process and its outcomes;
- Results in a set of school goals sufficiently clear and compelling, and focused that staff are able and motivated to use them as primary sources of direction in their work;
- Regularly and systematically monitors progress in achieving school goals; monitoring results are used as a significant stimulus for organizational learning;
- Includes a process for evaluating the school planning process to determine its value in achieving the school’s goals;
- Communicates school planning processes and outcomes to all stakeholders regularly.

Reporting on work undertaken in Ontario’s Halton school district during the early to mid-90s, Stoll and Fink (1996) illustrate an approach to school improvement planning that incorporates most of these qualities. In this case, the process entails four stages:

- assessment: the collection of information to be used in setting goals and priorities for the schools improvement efforts by such means as informal observation, discussions, surveys, and test results;
- planning: using assessment information to set goals or targets, identify actions to be taken to accomplish goals, establish timelines and responsibilities, estimate resource needs, and specify the criteria by which progress and eventual success will be judged;
- implementation: putting the plan into action, monitoring progress and unintended effects, making mid-course adjustments, and especially providing support to implementers;

- evaluation: distributed throughout the process, this entails the establishment of baseline information against which progress can be measured. It also entails monitoring progress and judging the extent to which goals are met.

As part of their description of the Halton development planning process, Stoll and Fink stress, among other things, the need for coordination by a school planning team which may include parents and students in addition to staff. They also argue for the importance of attending to the school's culture, focusing on a small number of manageable goals, and using the development plan flexibly. Strategic or development approaches to school improvement, such as the one described by Stoll and Fink usually create a role for parents encompassed in Epstein's Decision Making category of parent participation, with more or less extensive involvement as members of school planning teams.

Results of two projects carried out by the University of Cambridge's Institute of Education suggest that successful school improvement planning depends on establishing and sustaining a culture of enquiry and reflection, a commitment to collaborative planning and staff development, high levels of stakeholder involvement, and effective coordination strategies; it requires, as well, the use of systematic evidence, focusing on student learning, and encouraging careful monitoring of both teaching and pupil progress.

While often used as part of other approaches to school improvement, the establishment of student standards, wide-spread student testing of their achievement, and judgements about schools and teachers based on the results, is a strategy most often associated with strategic or development planning. There is, however, considerable evidence that this strategy can have disastrous unintended consequences. For students, such consequences may include, minimizing their individual differences, narrowing the curriculum to which they are exposed, diverting enormous amounts of time from instruction to test preparation, and negatively influencing schools' willingness to accept students with weak academic records, (e.g., McNeil, 2000; Ohanian, 1999; O'Neil & Tell, 1999; Bay et al, 1999).

Consequences for teachers, include the creation of incentives for cheating, feelings of shame, guilt and anger, and a sense of dissonance and alienation. Especially when multiple choice tests are exclusively used over extended periods of time, teachers' efforts to prepare students for them may lead to the atrophy of teachers' instructional repertoires (Lee, 1993; Nolan, Haladyna & Hass, 1989). In the face of the high stakes created by many states/provinces and districts, this is likely to call on more moral courage than many administrators will be willing to demonstrate by themselves. Strong parent and community support for a humane, well-balanced curriculum is especially crucial in the face of such high stakes.

Whole School Approaches to School Improvement

This relatively recent approach to school improvement aims to change many schools, but one at a time. According to Slavin and Fashola, the approach:

...emphasizes development of comprehensive, replicable approaches either to whole school reform or to innovations in a particular curriculum area, rigorous evaluation of the reform design..., and the construction of a network of trainers and participating schools capable of enabling large numbers of schools to adopt and successfully implement the designs (1998, p. 4).

This approach is quite direct, not relying on broad restructuring initiatives, state standards and assessment and other indirect strategies, the influence of which is assumed eventually to seep into classrooms.

One prominent strand of this approach had its genesis in an education summit convened by U.S. president George Bush, Sr. and attended by 49 state governors, in September 1989. Emerging from that summit was the creation, in 1991, of a private, nonprofit corporation, New American Schools (Kearns & Anderson, 1996), charged with creating radically new, “break-the-mold” school designs for the 21st century (Stringfield, Ross & Smith, 1996). The process used to accomplish that goal, beginning with a request for proposals, included initial design, field testing, and scaling-up stages. By 1995, nine designs had reached the second of these stages, and seven of the nine had begun to scale up.

The Rand corporation evaluation of these initiatives (Bodilly, 1996) distinguished three categories of designs among the nine:

- Core designs: these emphasize changes within the school only, changes in curriculum, instruction, standards, assessments, student groupings, community involvement, and professional development, for example.
- Comprehensive designs: extending the core designs, this category includes integrated social services, changes in school governance and organization, as well as changes in staffing.
- Systemic designs: mostly focused on changes outside the school, these designs aim to change the systems within which schools find themselves - the district, the state legislature, professional development providers, and the community.

According to the Rand evaluation, Core designs are the fastest to begin and Systemic designs the slowest. But both Comprehensive and Systemic designs have the greatest potential for influencing large numbers of schools.

New American Schools is by no means the only group pursuing whole school approaches to school improvement, however. Slavin and Fashola (1998) review evidence concerning the effects of 14 whole school designs, and Herman (1999) describes and evaluates a total of 24. Because Herman offers the most comprehensive information about this approach to school improvement, she is the primary reference for subsequent information about whole school approaches.

Whole school designs are not unlike the so-called “correlates” of effective schools in the sense that they describe some desirable set of conditions which, if in place, are assumed to foster good things for students. But most of the designs, unlike the correlates, have, as an important part of them, strategies for implementation. For example, these strategies often touch on staff participation in decisions, voting on acceptance of a design, and the training of staff in the skills required by the design.

Herman proposes a sequence of seven steps that a staff should follow in order to select the best design for implementation in their school:

1. Identify the school’s needs;
2. Investigate alternative approaches;
3. Ask the developers questions;
4. Call a random sample of schools that are using the approaches;
5. Visit schools wherever possible;
6. Match the developers’ requirements with available resources;
7. Put the decision to a vote.

There is considerable variation among the 24 whole school designs described by Herman with respect to advice for implementation after the selection decision has been made. The most explicit advice is provided by the developers of the Onward to Excellence Program who recommend the following process (Herman, 1999, p. 95) developed from their work with many schools implementing this design:

1. Conduct an initial assessment to determine the school’s areas of need;
2. Develop a school performance profile that shows trends in student achievement;
3. Establish one or two broad goals for school improvement related to student achievement;
4. Study research on best practices related to that goal;
5. Review current instructional practices in relationship to the research;
6. Determine how to improve student learning in the area of the goals;
7. Develop an implementation plan;
8. Carry out the implementation plan (identify resources, organize training, change practices);
9. Monitor progress toward meeting goals;
10. Review progress toward meeting goals and set new goals after first goals have been met.

Of the 24 models of schoolwide reform described by Herman, 23 outline an explicit role for parents. Table 2.1 lists the types of parent involvement specified in the 23 designs and indicates which designs call for each. In some cases these forms of parent involvement are a required or essential part of a design, in others, an encouraged or only incidental part of a design (i.e., some schools implementing the design have identified the parent role as helpful in their own context).

Table 2.1 classifies different types of parent involvement in whole school designs according to the six-fold Epstein (1995) taxonomy; these are parenting, communicating, volunteering,

learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with the community. As the table indicates all categories of parent involvement are called for by at least some designs. Volunteering is the most frequently mentioned form of parent involvement, considered part of eight whole school reform designs. Considered part of four designs, parenting is the least frequently called for. Collaborating with the community and learning at home are each included in five whole school reforms, while communicating and decision making are mentioned as part of six designs. This analysis indicates that while almost all whole school approaches to school improvement consider some form of parent participation important, none call for especially radical forms of such participation.

Table 2.1

Types of Parent Involvement in Whole School Approaches to School Improvement (based on information in Herman et al., 1999)

Type of Parent Involvement	Required/Considered Essential	Encouraged	Incidental
<i>Parenting</i>			
Receive outlines of curricular outlines sent home by teachers			Core Knowledge
General encouragement to become involved in children's learning		High/Scope K-3 Model	
Participate in hands-on activities experienced by students		Different ways of Knowing	
Parents encouraged to use a prescribed guide for working on their children's skills at home		Direct Instruction	
<i>Communicating</i>			
Involved in identifying skills and knowledge students should master		Coalition of Essential Schools	
Participate in modifying individualized instructional plans		Community for Learning	
Read and agree to school goals and statement of parent obligations	Accelerated Schools		
Parent conferences	ATLAS Communities		
Open communication between school and parents		Community for Learning Different Ways of Knowing	
Participate in social activities involving school community	School Development Program		

Type of Parent Involvement	Required/Considered Essential	Encouraged	Incidental
<i>Le bénévolat</i>			
Help locate classroom resources			Core Knowledge
Involvement in writing teaching and learning covenants, making decisions related to the covenants		League of Professional Schools	
Participate in action research		League of Professional Schools	
With training, lead student seminars		Paideia	
Contribute expertise		Expeditionary Learning	
Parent volunteer	School Development Program	Basic Schools	
Programs: act as tutors and aides		Network Co-Nect Modern Red Schoolhouse Talent Development High School with Career Academics Urban Learning Centers	
<i>Learning at Home</i>			
Learn about classroom activities	Modern Red Schoolhouse		
Involvement in students exhibitions/presentation	ATLAS Communities	Expeditionary Learning	
Involved in student' education at home		Community for Learning Talent Development High School with Career Academics	
<i>Decision-Making</i>			
Join task forces and committees, become involved in school decision making	Accelerated Schools High Schools that Work Modern Red Schoolhouse Development Program		
School and pathway decisions	ATLAS Communities		
Join school leadership/design teams	ATLAS Communities Onward to Excellence		
Review data, plan implementation, assess progress, evaluate results	ATLAS Communities High Schools that Work		
<i>Collaboration with the Community</i>			
Act as community representatives		Urban Learning Centers	
Partnerships with parents		Basic Schools Network	
School establishes a family support team	Roots and Wings Success for All		
Appoint community outreach coordinator	America's Choice		
School provides a variety of support services for families		Urban Learning Centers	

Capacity Building Approaches to School Improvement

This final approach to be reviewed is largely indifferent to the precise nature of the improvement undertaken by a school, in the short run, and is focused, instead, on developing the school's capacity for undertaking any type of change that may be required in the future. This approach is justified by the argument that in a context of declining resources, escalating expectations for student learning, and turbulent environments, schools need to be designed so that changing is considered an ordinary activity rather than an extraordinary event. At the heart of any organizations' capacity for such continuous improvement is the individual and collective learning of its members (e.g. Peterson, McCarthy, & Elmore, 1996); for example, improving the school's instructional services thereby improving student's learning requires considerable learning on the part of teachers, as well as those providing administrative and other forms of support for teachers.

Appreciation of the importance of such individual and collective professional learning has given rise to a venerable body of research on organizational learning or capacity-building processes in non-school organizations (for a comprehensive review, see Cousins, 1996) and a quite recent literature about such processes in schools (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Louis & Leithwood, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Results of this school-oriented research suggest that seven sets of conditions enhance the likelihood of school improvement through capacity building. These conditions are related to the school's: mission and goals; culture; structure; information-collection and decision-making processes; policies and procedures; community partnerships; and leadership.

Mission and goals. The official source of a school's purpose is often found in a written mission statement. Such statements describe the school's explicit conception of what it would like to accomplish. An implicit source of direction is to be found in the norms, values, beliefs and assumptions shared by members of the organization - the organization's culture. Depending on the form and content of the culture, these two sources of direction - mission and culture - may be mutually supportive, unrelated or actually in conflict (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

A school's explicit mission and goals is a powerful determinant of individual and collective professional learning when it is used by members of the school to help them understand and evaluate information coming to them from outside sources, or as feedback from actions taken within the school. Serving as perceptual screens, the mission and goals potentially helps people decide what to attend to from the full array of demands, expectations and information with which they come into contact.

To serve as a stimulus for action, school staff and other stakeholders need to be aware of its mission and goals. Furthermore, the mission and goals must be clear and personally meaningful to the members; this is most likely to be the case when the mission and goals is an expression of fundamental values held by members of the school and the people served by the school. When these conditions are met, the mission and goals serves as a criterion for decision making at every level.

Such active use of the school's mission and goals develops when it is created with the extensive involvement of staff, through a process that encourages sustained and serious discussion, and when the initial outcome of that discussion is subject to continuous review and refinement (Heald-Taylor, 1991; Wallace, 1996; Wilson & Corcoran, 1988).

Culture. A school's organizational culture is "... a system of ordinary, taken-for-granted meanings and symbols with both implicit and explicit content [i.e. norms, values, beliefs, assumptions] that is, deliberately and non-deliberately, learned and shared among members" (Erickson, 1987, p. 12). There are three dimensions to a school's culture, its form, content, and strength.

With respect to form, a school's culture may vary from one which largely supports isolated, individual work and problem solving to one which is based on collaboration in its various forms; collaboration among sub-groups in the organization (balkanized) to whole staff collaboration (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1991). Evidence suggests a strong link between highly collaborative school cultures and schools' effectiveness (Little, 1989; Fieman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Authentic collaboration among teachers, about the improvement of teaching and learning for example, provides opportunities for the dissemination of hard-won technical knowledge from one teacher to another. It also provides occasions for joint problem solving around individual teacher dilemmas as well as tasks shared by teachers, curriculum development tasks, for example.

The specific nature of a school staff's shared norms, values, beliefs and assumptions defines the content of a school's culture. Staff in especially productive schools, for example, typically hold norms of continuous improvement and professional growth, as well as norms of mutual respect. These staff value the welfare and learning of their students first and foremost. As well, they value the participation of all the school's stakeholders in decision making, and believe that all of their students can learn and that they are responsible for ensuring that such learning occurs (Mortimore et al, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1989).

The extent to which norms, values, beliefs and assumptions are shared among staff defines the strength of a school's culture. Strong cultures are especially useful in the day-to-day conduct of the school's business because the hectic and fast paced nature of the enterprise provides little opportunity for collegial deliberation (Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1991). However, excessive consensus among staff can be self-sealing, cutting off the inclination to award ideas for change the attention they may deserve (Fullan, 1993). Indeed, learning what is needed for organizational improvement demands openness to new ideas from diverse sources, along with norms of risk taking and experimentation, and beliefs about the importance of learning from small failures (Watkins & Marsick, 1993; Sitkin, 1992).

Evidence concerning how less productive school cultures can be changed is modest. However, this evidence recommends several strategies: using such bureaucratic strategies as the hiring of new staff to support cultural norms; persistently communicating the values considered to be important to the culture; providing symbolic support, through ceremonies for example, for the values and beliefs considered important to the school; and providing staff development

activities which empower staffs to act in ways valued by the school (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990).

Structure and organization. An organization's structure is "an outline of the desired patterns of activities, expectations and exchanges" (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 46) among members of the organization and the people they serve. Schools, like many other types of organizations, are attempting to become more adaptive and flexible. One way of doing this is by moving from relatively hierarchical, centralized structures that function well in predictable environments to more organic, decentralized, and fluid structures which acknowledge the turbulent and unpredictable context in which schools now find themselves (Banner & Gagne, 1995; Morgan, 1986). Decentralized school structures potentially encourage learning and reflective action-taking by spreading, to multiple members of the school, the demands for thinking about new information. This reduces the number of things an individual has to think about at one time, making it easier for them to assimilate those new patterns of practice.

Evidence is compelling that teachers' participation in school decisions has positive effects on their work (e.g., Conley, 1993). Furthermore, these effects can be achieved without implementing the various forms of site-based management so popular across the country at present. Site-based management has proven to be very difficult to implement adequately (Leithwood & Menzies, 1996a; Malen & Ogawa, 1988) and has yet to demonstrate many of the consequence for which it is advocated (Leithwood & Menzies, 1996b; Murphy & Beck, 1995).

In sum, collective and individual professional learning in schools is most likely to be stimulated by school structures which: encourage collective problem solving; allocate responsibility and accountability for decision making to those most directly affected by decisions; avoid wasting peoples' time on decisions that do not effect them and about which they have no special knowledge; and provide those involved with ready access to the information they require for their decision making.

Information collection and decision-making processes. Garbage in, garbage out is an old adage sometimes used in the context of statistical data analysis: no amount of sophistication in statistical analysis will compensate for information collected poorly in the first place. Something similar is true of organizational learning in schools. The quality of that learning depends significantly on the amount and quality of information available to members of the organization to assist in their learning (McGrath, 1986); it also depends on the methods used for processing that information (Gersick & Davis-Sacks, 1991; Goodman, et al, 1986). Increasing those involved in decision making is often viewed as a strategy to better ensure the availability and effective use of reliable information for decision making.

The participation of all relevant stakeholders assumes that many heads are capable of better sense-making than is one, an assumption for which Simon (1996) has provided compelling theoretical justification. Nonetheless, teams or groups often do not live up this potential. Indeed Janis (1982) coined the term "groupthink" to describe the unproductive nature of much group work. Fostering productive problem solving within groups depends on creating a set of conditions including: the encouragement of divergent views; open expression of ideas; awareness of the knowledge and other limits of the group; recognition of the unique

contributions each member of the group is capable of making; and, willingness by the group to engage in the discussion of collective doubts (Neck & Manz, 1994; Hackman, 1991). The creation of these conditions usually depends on team leadership and a supportive culture of the sort described above.

Policies and procedures. To serve school improvement purposes, policies and procedures need to be both coherent and supportive. By coherent, we mean that, as a set, school policies need to be internally consistent in the practices that they encourage and discourage. By supportive we mean that, as a set, school policies actually contribute to the school improvement effort rather than simply being neutral or indifferent. An indifferent teacher selection policy, for example, would include selection criteria reflecting current knowledge about effective teaching applicable in schools across the whole district or province. A supportive teacher selection policy would include, in addition, criteria reflecting the capacities needed by teachers to accomplish medium and long term improvement goals unique to the school.

Improvements to teaching and learning are fostered by the maintenance of a relatively consistent, meaningful policy focus at school, district and state levels. Because such consistency across levels of the school system is rare (Fuhrman, 1993), schools need to be proactive in developing their own school improvement plans and using these plans as defense against external incoherence.

Leadership. School leadership is one of the most significant factors influencing the success of school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1992). But the context for leadership is a powerful determinant of the forms of leadership that will be useful. This assertion discourages efforts to define, in general, the specific behaviors of effective leaders. Rather, it encourages the view that leadership is situational and context dependent (Duke, 1987). Efforts to describe school leadership that builds capacity must acknowledge the importance of situation and context; this means allowing for variation in leadership style and behavior. But is possible to do this and still endorse a particular model of leadership when the model fits the broad challenges being experienced by many reforming and restructuring schools and when considerable variation in behavior within the model is possible. Evidence suggests that a transformational model of leadership may be a productive component of most approaches to school improvement (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999).

Research concerning the meaning of transformational leadership in practice suggests that it is multidimensional (e.g., Podsakoff et al, 1990). It is concerned with developing a vision, fostering acceptance of group goals and providing intellectual stimulation. It is also concerned with providing support to individual staff members as they grapple with changing their practices, monitoring high performance expectations in the face of learning new behaviors, and setting an example for staff to follow that is consistent with the values espoused by the district or school. Each of these dimensions of transformational leadership can be carried out through a variety of quite different, specific behaviors.

An illustration. The Manitoba School Improvement Project (Earl & Lee, 2000), begun in 1991 with 22 secondary schools, is a mature, well developed, and carefully evaluated illustration of a capacity-building approach to school improvement. While each school in the project had

access to similar, capacity-building resources, the content of the improvement was more or less unique for each school. There was no common prescription for the change process to be followed in these schools. But the process used by each was premised on the belief that change is more likely when teachers have some influence over its direction and speed, when the school plans its own initiatives, and when the role of external project staff is to provide help, encouragement and prodding.

At the time of the most intensive evaluation undertaken for the project, one third of the 22 schools showed substantial improvement and half made considerable movement along a continuum of improvement defined by a school improvement index composed of student learning, student engagement, school improvement processes and individual project success.

Among other results, the evaluation uncovered a handful of key factors explaining school improvement success. These factors included a feeling of urgency among a core group of teachers in a school that results in energy and productive action, as well as experience with a call to action or critical incident which jarred the school forcing people to believe that change was urgent—status quo perceived to be no longer acceptable. This is especially pronounced when it involves students. With the energy and action came a sense of having control and knowing what they were doing, and professional pride in their efforts. Also a key factor explaining success was a sense of collective self efficacy on the part of staffs resulting from a feeling that they had or could acquire the resources they needed to do the job

Access to a wide range of support (funding, technical evaluation support, consultative assistance, staff development) when it is needed turned out to be important for success, as was broadening the base of leadership or ownership for the project. In the most successful schools, school administrators became facilitators and advocates for the program, helping to redirect efforts when the focus becomes unclear. Successful schools also developed the ability to collect and interpret data about their progress and engaged in ongoing inquiry and reflection using data as one element of their plan.

Parent participation. We have described and illustrated this capacity-building approach to school improvement at some length because it is currently being awarded considerable attention as an important adjunct to most other approaches. But we have had little to say, as yet, about parent participation. This is simply because it is awarded mostly implicit attention in written accounts. Community and parent relationships may be a source of expertise and capacity for schools in many ways. For example, parents are a rich source of information about the instructional needs of their students, sometimes able to predict school conditions which foster student learning better than teachers (Snydor & Ebmeir, 1992). Parents also bring fresh perspectives to the school about priorities for education and more specific causes of students' responses to instruction. When parents value the instruction being received by their children, they also become the most powerful allies that teachers can have, a potentially "radical" form of parent participation. So parent participation in this approach to school improvement has considerable, but as yet underexplored, potential.

School Improvement Planning: A Closer Look

This section of the review focuses more narrowly and in greater depth on research about the approach to school improvement adopted by the ten schools which are the subject of the first phases of our research -- school development or school improvement planning (referred to subsequently as “SIP”). As we indicated above, this approach involves systematic efforts to create more goal-oriented, efficient, and effective schools by introducing more rational planning procedures. We examine here empirical evidence concerning the nature of planning, its effects on the school organizational and on students, and on how parents participate in these processes.

Evidence reviewed in this section was located, initially, through an online search of the ERIC system. This search uncovered 29 documents on school development planning and 38 on school improvement planning. (The term “school development planning” (SDP) is most frequently used in the United Kingdom and Australia while the term “school improvement planning” (SIP) is most often used in Canada and the United States). Forty-nine of these 67 documents were chosen for review based on their availability and their relevance to our study. Of these, 33 were empirical studies undertaken in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom (including England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland), and the United States.

Reviews of literature about both SIP and school effectiveness also were analyzed. Those reviews reported in *The International Handbook of School Effectiveness Research* (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) were particularly helpful in providing an international perspective on the field and further references about factors associated with school effectiveness.

Planning Processes

Research about this approach to school improvement paints a relatively unambiguous picture of planning processes; not every study in our review outlined the processes associated with planning, however, and those that did reported some differences.

The technical processes associated with planning were reported to be very similar across studies while the processes used to implement the plan varied much more. Differences in organizational contexts (e.g. school culture/characteristics and district/government role) and the social dimensions of planning (e.g. leadership, collaboration, teamwork, communication, and decision-making) may account for some of the variations in outcomes that will be described later in this section.

The technical processes associated with SIP usually are described as linear or cyclical, with several main stages. Furthermore, engagement in these processes is assumed to be continuous; once the final stage in the cycle is reached the process begins afresh with a focus on problems discovered during implementation, or on new priorities as they arise. Hargreaves & Hopkins (1991, p.4-5), as one example of how SIP processes are described, outline a five-staged process which includes: getting started; conducting an audit of the school’s strengths and weaknesses; setting priorities and targets; implementation or putting the plans in place; and evaluating the success of the plans and their implementation. These stages in the SIP process described by

Hargreaves and Hopkins are illustrative of the five main stages of SIP reported in other literature that we reviewed (Broadhead et al, 1996; Flinspach & Ryan, 1992; Heistad & Spicuzza, 2000; McBee & Fink, 1989; McInerney & Leach, 1992; and Wilson & McPake, 2000).

The first stage involves activities and decisions concerning the adoption or initial beginning of the planning process. In some cases the decision to adopt school developmental/improvement planning is mandated by a senior level of government, for example in Australia (Dellar, 1995a, Hatton, 2001), the United Kingdom (Giles, 1998), and Chicago (Flinspach & Ryan, 1992). Adoption may also be a choice for schools such as in the Manitoba School Improvement Program (Earl & Lee, 1998). Communications with stakeholders in the school community about the planning process is typically part of this stage. In many schools, a group or several teams are organized to participate in the planning process. Training in the process of school development/improvement planning may be taken (Broadhead et al, 1996).

During the second or “design” stage, schools determine what should be included in their plan by incorporating requirements from district and senior levels of government with school needs and priorities. They examine their strengths and weaknesses (sometimes referred to as conducting an audit) using achievement data and other pertinent information (MacGilchrist & Mortimore, 1997). A plan is established according to a framework that requires action to be taken over a period of time, usually one to five years. During this stage, consideration is given to the school’s mission, its goals, indicators of success, responsibilities for carrying out actions, the setting for improvement, and timing.

During the implementation stage, plans are carried out at the classroom and/or school level. Responsibility for implementation may be shared by the principal, teachers, school based decision-making groups (or improvement teams) and other stakeholders. Monitoring is sometimes viewed as part of the implementation stage, for formative purposes. We prefer to distinguish it as an activity, if not a stage, to recognize the ongoing nature of assessing progress towards goals. Monitoring the effects of the plan and the processes used for its implementation allows schools to see where they are succeeding or where they may need to make adjustments during the implementation process.

Evaluation is sometimes undertaken by external bodies and/or by the school itself. It may be a formal requirement and process. This is the case, for example, in the UK with an inspection service that judges the failure or success of schools and their improvement efforts. An external evaluation is also part of the Manitoba School Improvement Process. Evaluation also may be less formal and limited to school personnel discussion of progress towards goals as they have experienced it.

Reporting on the results of the planning process within the school community or beyond to districts or governments is also a feature of the evaluation phase in some settings (MacGilchrist & Mortimore, 1997 p. 206). This serves both formative and summative purposes. Even in such cases, however, SIP is meant to be a continuous process so that the results of evaluation inform future plans and directions.

Improvement Planning Effects

Our search uncovered a relatively small amount of evidence concerning the organizational and student outcomes associated with SIP.

Organizational outcomes. McInerney & Leach (1992, p. 22), reporting on interviews with principals and teachers about the impact of SIP, found that positive outcomes outnumbered negative outcomes two to one. The list of positive outcomes in this study included increased awareness of the school's strengths and weaknesses, increased unity of staff, increased communication with parents, increased communication with community, curriculum better suited to meet student needs, increased openness by teachers to change, and opportunities for staff development.

Student outcomes. Only a few of the studies included in our review inquired about the effects of SIP on students. None of the empirical studies from the United States provided such data. As a minor exception to this claim, one U.S. study conducted in 64 high schools in Indiana, examined teachers' and principals' views of the impact of school improvement planning. While the researchers noted that in 23 schools, achievement test scores had improved, neither principals nor teachers reported such an increase themselves. Addressing a possible reason for this discrepancy, Flinspach, et al (1992, p. 45) recommended measuring interim indicators of changes in student learning which eventually may lead to improved test scores (e.g., students reading more books, finishing more assignments, participating more in class and writing improvements).

Studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia did provide some evidence of SIP's impact on student learning. MacGilchrist & Mortimore (1997) examined the impact of school development planning in nine U.K. primary schools. This study suggested that type of improvement plan may be key to impacts on schools and student learning. Four types of plans were evident in their research: the rhetorical plan, the singular plan, the cooperative plan and the corporate plan. Their impacts ranged from negative to very positive. While the cooperative plan had some positive outcomes for the school and classroom, its effect on students were difficult to determine. Only the corporate plan had a noticeable effect on student learning. In their words:

The corporate plan is characterised by a united effort to improve. There is a strong sense of shared ownership and involvement by the teaching staff and an attempt is made to include others in the process. The plan is multi-purpose in nature and there is a sense of control over the process, and confidence that it will lead to improvements in efficiency and effectiveness. The focus on teaching and learning, especially improvements in the quality of children's learning, is a particular characteristic. The written plan is an open, working document and the leadership of the plan is shared amongst the senior management team. The complexity and continuous nature of process are recognised and the management of the process is shared by all the staff. Financial resources and staff development are linked to the implementation of the plan and monitoring and evaluation strategies are sound. Teachers have a definite sense of responsibility for the outcome of the plan. The impact of the plan is significant across the school as a whole, for teachers in classrooms and for children's learning. A link can be

discerned between school development, teachers' development, children's development. There is evidence of a learning community within the school with headteachers and classteachers exhibiting the characteristics of reflective practitioners, continuously seeking to develop and improve their practice. (MacGilchrist & Mortimore, 1997,p. 208-209)

Of the nine schools in this study, only two had a corporate type of plan. Five schools had a cooperative plan, one school had a singular plan, and one school had a rhetorical plan. The value of a corporate or collaborative approach is echoed in other research (Broadhead et al, 1998; Giles, 1998; and Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991).

Reeves (2000) reported research examining SIP in 24 elementary and secondary schools in Scotland. This study found that elementary schools, which produced school development plans using "good practice", had a positive impact on student attainment. However, the evidence of impact did not hold for secondary schools. In both elementary and secondary schools, positive attainment was related to "capability and capacity" building strategies.

Only one of the five Australian studies included in our review documented positive effects on student achievement. Hatton (2001) reported that school development or strategic planning was helping one disadvantaged school work "towards meeting the educational needs of its client group" (p. 130). 'Basic Skill' test results had improved for the school's students who traditionally had poor results. The extraordinary personal efforts of the principal and the commitment of staff were factors in this success. This school followed a style of planning similar to the "corporate" style described above by MacGilchrist and Mortimore (1997).

In Canada, the planning process used by the "Manitoba School Improvement Project" (MSIP) reported positive impacts on student learning.

"Five of the 15 senior schools involved in the program showed evidence of increased student learning as a results of the project and, in two of these, the learning is broad-based across the whole school. Five other schools provided evidence of some increase in student learning for at least some of the students in the school. In the remaining five senior years schools, there is no evidence that the project had led to any increase in student learning" (Earl & Lee, 1998).

The style of planning in the MSIP schools would be described, using the MacGilchrist and Mortimore categories, as collaborative, with wide participation of teachers, parents, the community and students as well as the administration and outside facilitators.

The "Improving the Quality of Education of All" (IQEA) project in the U.K. also reports success in increasing student achievement (Harris & Young, 2000; Harris, 2001). Both the MSIP and IQEA projects combine the school development/improvement planning process with capacity building approaches that involve stakeholders in visioning and in bringing about organizational change. School community ownership of the process is a strong component of these projects. Harris and Young (2000) argue that the success of these projects demonstrates that successful SIP involves internal and external agency, a focus on specific teaching and learning goals, commitment to teacher development and professional growth, devolved leadership, and formative and summative evaluation. Harris and Young (2000) and Earl et al.

(1998) claim that “urgency, energy, agency and more energy” are the key ingredients for successful SIP.

There is, then, some limited evidence that school improvement processes may have positive effects on student learning, depending very much on the form of planning used (some combination of what has been described as collaborative and corporate) and when key conditions prevail (e.g., Earl et al’s urgency, energy, and agency).

Parent Participation in Improvement Planning

Most of the studies touched on in the previous section did not address parent participation directly, although, in a few cases it was generally referred to as part of the content of plans (McInerney and Leach 1992). In a small number of studies (McBee and Fink 1989; Flinspach, Ryan et al. 1992; Dellar 1994; O’Donoghue and Dimmock 1996; Griffith 2001; Hatton 2001) parent participation was an explicit part of the data reported and this section is restricted to those studies. We describe the role of parents in improvement planning and the effects of such involvement, as well as the factors that influenced their participation.

Roles and Effects

Parents and school councils, in the main, play a limited role in school planning according to the reviewed literature. However, they can have an effect on the outcomes of plans as well as on other matters. Evidence is drawn from two countries, the United States, in three states, and Australia, which have mandated parent or stakeholder involvement in school improvement efforts.

The Australian school system (see especially the state of Victoria) was restructured in the 1980s and 1990s allowing for centralized control over policy and resource allocation but decentralized management of schools using tools such as school development planning and school based decision-making groups (Hatton, 2001). Parents were one set of stakeholders, along with teachers, administrators, and sometimes students, who were invited to participate on school committees that would plan for improvements at the school level. In the three case studies of the school development planning attempts discussed here, the parental role in decision making was regarded as limited: two cases were at the high school level (Dellar, 1994 and O’Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996) and one case was at the elementary level (Hatton, 2001).

Hatton (2001) reported on the tremendous efforts made by the school principal to enlist parents in decision-making. Most parents were reluctant to attend formal meetings and needed personal invitations, a time consuming ordeal for the principal, to be convinced that they should participate. Many parents regarded formal meetings as intimidating so care had to be taken to make them feel comfortable. Parents were invited to inservice training courses, to strategic planning sessions and to join planning committees. Some parents proved to be more able to effectively participate on committees and this was attributed to class differences.

In this study the school's improvement initiative was reported to have had positive impact on student achievement in basic skills tests. But the link between parent involvement and these results was not described. Nonetheless, the reported positive outcomes of having parents involved included "seeing teachers in less status differentiated ways which, in turn, results in a more productive relationship between teachers and parents" (p. 131). There were less positive results, as well, including the time demanded from staff and the cost of inservicing parents, born by the school as an "opportunity" cost, so that they could effectively participate. (p. 131). The author mused about whether involving parents in activities where they were "comfortable and skilled" might be a more appropriate approach (p.131).

O'Donoghue and Dimmock (1996) also examined parents' role in school improvement. Parents had input into identifying needs and objectives for the school development plan through their participation on the school council and its sub-committees and on other school committees; however, the principal, after staff consultation, retained responsibility for formulating strategies to meet improvement goals (p. 80). Some teachers believed that parents were not treated or "seen as equal partners in the (SIP) process" (p. 81). Moreover, it was difficult to get parents involved in decision-making. Most parents focused on their own children's welfare rather than the interests of all children. Additionally, teachers questioned the commitment and the abilities of parents. Although parents were represented in equal numbers on paper, in reality, teachers attended all meetings while parents missed some meetings; therefore, teachers had more say (p. 81).

In this study, the impact of parent involvement was reported to be minimal but positive. Parents were able to identify school needs and objectives but, in the main, they were regarded as not useful contributors to, and uninterested in, school development planning by teachers. Teachers could see that, in the long run, school planning could have a positive impact on teaching and learning but they thought that it would likely come from their involvement rather than from parents' efforts (p. 86).

Dellar (1994) reported on the establishment of a new school-based decision-making (SBM) group in one high school. Previously, a small group of parents had been involved in the school through a Parent and Citizen's Association whose role was narrowly focused on fund-raising and operating the school canteen (p. 6). With the advent of the "Better Schools Program", parent involvement was extended to include developing school plans through school-based management (SBM). Unfortunately, there was little shared understanding of the pertinent government policy and this created confusion about the type of SBM model that should be used at the school. The principal and parents had different sources of information on the matter and, therefore, a very different idea about what was required. Meetings tended to be combative rather than collaborative with members openly hostile to each other and to their ideas. This did not appear to be a productive vehicle for parent and school collaboration. It was difficult to judge the full nature of the parents' decision-making role based on the evidence presented. Their involvement created conflict and a tense school climate in the short term. No positive outcomes were reported.

Many US states have introduced accountability measures with school improvement planning and parent involvement in decision-making being features of their reforms. In Oklahoma, for example, a qualitative study of the effects of school improvement processes in nine schools was conducted. Parents were members of the school improvement teams that discussed issues, and agreed to plans and activities. In some schools, parents played a leadership role as facilitators of small groups in the SIP process along with administrators and teachers. No direct link was made between parent involvement in decision making and student outcomes. However, the study noted that school climate improvements were evident to interviewees, that there was a greater sense of ownership among stakeholders for taking action and that many positive activities and strategies were carried out.

A quantitative study in Maryland looked at principal behaviours related to parent involvement. It appeared that parents were involved in PTA meetings but it was not clear about the extent of their decision-making involvement. This study was more useful in examining the factors associated with parent involvement.

The most interesting study reviewed for this section was Flinspach et al (1992)'s examination of parent involvement in school improvement planning in Chicago. This study offers an in-depth description of school council involvement in decision-making and in school improvement planning. Unfortunately, the effects of that participation on student learning were not fully explored. Nevertheless, the study provided useful information for our purposes.

The Chicago School Reform Act required principals to consult with stakeholders in the development and implementation of school improvement plans. Local school councils were to be established as the structure for decision-making. The Flinspach et al (1992) study examined the role of local school councils (LSCs) in fourteen schools, then focused on the school improvement process in a subset of three. In the fourteen schools, over half of the LSCs had created a formal structure for involvement in SIP. There were three types of formal involvement: "some councils created SIP committees that included teachers, the principal and LSC members; some appointed LSC representatives to membership in schoolwide SIP committees; and others reserved time at their regular meetings to discuss SIP revisions" (p. 3). In the remaining schools, there was no formal vehicle for LSC involvement in SIP, although many LSC approved plans as presented by school committees. In some of these schools, parents and school councils were encouraged to participate in the SIP process but preferred a less active role. Parents did contribute suggestions to the content of plans in such areas as safety, discipline, parent/community involvement but not usually in curriculum matters (p. 4). In terms of monitoring and evaluating the impact of the plan, principals and teachers were more frequently engaged in this job, when it was undertaken at all. Many LSCs tended to restrict their involvement to receiving staff progress reports at their meetings (p. 4).

In the three in-depth studies of LSCs' involvement in school improvement planning, there were marked differences in the amount of decision-making power exercised by parents. In one school, the principal dominated the planning process and this created problems as the LSC felt that issues were not properly being addressed. The LSC fired the principal and hired a new principal who seemed to be more interested in collaboration with the school community. The

new principal formed a SIP committee, which later was named as a subcommittee of the LSC, and worked to ensure everyone had a say in developing the plan. The majority of participants in the SIP committee were teachers but LSC members and parents also attended. Teachers, rather than parents, had more influence on initiatives (p. 17). The LSC was only minimally involved in the implementation and revision of the plan as most of the decision-making took place in the SIP committee meetings in which few parents regularly attended (p. 18).

In another school, the principal devolved some decision-making to parents and teachers in the years prior to the study. This decentralization progressed and, in the study year, all administrators and teachers were involved in improvement planning and revision as well as the LSC and some parents (p. 20). The principal encouraged the LSC to take more responsibility for setting new directions for the plan, in focusing efforts on priorities, in dealing with the plan as a whole group rather than a sub-committee of the LSC (p. 22). The LSC concentrated on three goals: improving student self-esteem, increasing parent and community involvement in the school, and improving reading. The LSC suggested seventeen initiatives for school improvement and gathered support for these ideas from the people who would be implementing them.

The LSC members, however, did not hold themselves accountable for initiatives; rather they planned actions for other parents and teachers. This led to some initial teacher resistance to their ideas, as it was more work for them. But eventually at least half of the ideas were accepted by the teachers and the rest were forwarded to the appropriate sub-committee for investigation (p. 27). Teachers decided what they could reasonably accomplish for the plan incorporating parent suggestions when feasible.

The last detailed case study school was a junior high. Evidence of parent involvement in decision making was not found as the school focused on teacher and administrator involvement in SIP. The LSC, in accordance with the legislation, would still have to approve the school improvement plan, although, this was not elaborated on.

In sum, the evidence from the six studies on parent participation in school improvement planning suggests that while the role of parents play varies, mainly they have limited influence over the nature of the plan and how they are implemented. Mandated participation does not change the realities of how schools are organized and how parents see themselves as participants. Principals and teachers appear to be the main players in school improvement initiatives. This does not mean that parents do not have input or influence, however. These cases illustrate that parents can participate and will focus on matters in which they feel they have the knowledge and the skills to contribute effectively. Moreover, it appears that while there were some negative consequences of having parents involved, such as conflict and teacher resistance, there were also positive outcomes. The positive effects included improved school climate, better relations and understanding between parents and teachers, better information about community needs and objectives being incorporated into plans which led to parents supporting activities, increased commitment to and ownership of plan directions by the parents, the development of parents as leaders through training and experience, and possible links to increased student achievement and learning.

Factors Influencing Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning

Evidence specifically about parent participation in SIP identified ten factors that influence such participation.

Leadership: Particularly administrative leadership, repeatedly appears in studies as a vital element related to parent involvement, generally, and in participative decision making. Principals are the main gatekeepers of schools and, as such, they set the stage for whether parents feel welcome to participate. Griffith (2000) concluded that leadership style may vary to suit the situation but it also depends on the leader's natural abilities and inclinations. In discussing principal leadership of parent involvement, he asserts that "...one principal leadership role will not necessarily result in the same effects across all schools. Important considerations are sociodemographic characteristics of the student population and consensus among parents. Indeed this perspective is consistent with the burgeoning literature on the importance of "fit" between individual behaviors (here, principal roles) and contextual features of the environment (here, student population and parent consensus)" (Griffith 2001, p. 183). The implications are that principals must consider how to encourage parent involvement in school improvement keeping in mind the needs and abilities of the parents.

In contrast, an Indiana study noted that improving schools had principals with certain leadership style: they were "supportive" and acted "as facilitator rather than director" (McInerney and Leach 1992, p. 23). In these schools, the principal made efforts to involve staff, in particular, in planning and the teachers reported a sense of ownership of the process. They also attended to parent and community involvement to garner support for change. Other studies noted that this is an important leadership activity (Griffith, 2001; McInerney and Leach 1992).

Griffith (2001) found certain leadership roles (the master teacher, the missionary and the gamesman) were effective for involving parents. The master teacher role, which focuses on the quality of instruction in the classroom, is associated with feelings of empowerment among parents, especially among disadvantaged parents. The missionary role, which concentrates on reaching out to meet the social needs of students, teachers and parents, is associated with more parent involvement, particularly among disadvantaged parents. The gamesman role, which negotiates among the divergent needs of the external and internal school community, helps the general parent population to feel empowered and informed but it had a negative effect on socioeconomically disadvantaged parents. Griffith (2001) concluded that principals have to adapt their leadership style to the needs of the community to increase involvement.

Parent Voice/Socioeconomic Background: Some studies have questioned whether parents are able to fully participate as equal partners in educational decision making. Parents may not be sure of themselves in curriculum matters so they may defer to teachers or to the principal on committees. Thus, they may be co-opted by influential school staff to rubberstamp policies and practices. (Flinspach, et. al., 1992; Hatton, 2001; and O'Donoghue and Dimmock, 1996)

A number of studies have examined who is being heard or served by educational reforms aimed at parent involvement in decision-making. Traditionally, school councils have been dominated by white, middle class women who may be more interested in securing benefits for their own children than in caring for other people's children. Hatton (2001) inquired about the

sociodemographic nature of the school community when trying to involve parents. Certain strategies such as inviting parents to attend meetings might work in middle class neighbourhoods where parents are comfortable with meetings, but disadvantaged parents may need different approaches such as personal attention and training. Both have resource costs that are often not funded. Dellar (1994) also noted that middle class parents were more comfortable with committee work than lower class parents; therefore, middle class views tended to dominate.

Collaboration, Ownership, and Commitment: Studies have emphasized that involving parents in the school improvement process increases their ownership of and commitment to plans and actions by schools. Flinspach et al. (1992, p. 46) opined that “broad participation in school improvement planning, with true discussion and debate, enhances collaboration and fosters commitment.” Experience on committees increases parents’ understanding of schools’ improvement as well. Hatton (2001) found that the involvement resulted in parents having improved perceptions of teachers. Likewise, teachers may gain a better appreciation about what parents can contribute and student needs through collaborative efforts.

School culture & climate: If a school’s climate welcomes parents and their involvement, this will encourage parents to participate in different activities including decision-making. (Flinspach et al., 1992; McBee & Fink, 1989) However, the creation of this climate often is associated with leadership (Flinspach et al., 1992; Griffith, 2001). Teacher attitudes also influence the climate of acceptance (O’Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996).

Communication: All stakeholders need to be communicated to regularly regarding the school improvement process (McBee & Fink, 1989). This fosters understanding and commitment. This is especially important for parents, as they are often not at the school building so they will be less in the know about SIP happenings.

Roles and Responsibilities: Roles and responsibilities need to be clear. Unclear roles and responsibilities can lead to conflict (Dellar, 1994) and to failure to be accountable (Flinspach, 1992).

Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes: Teaching and learning has been seen as the professional domain of teachers and some teachers resist efforts to involve parents in matters for which they have not been professionally trained. Moreover, they claim that parents show little interest in most curriculum matters, as it is the teachers’ territory (Dellar, 1994). However, through working together, parents and teachers may gain respect and understanding for each other, and the contributions that each can offer.

Context: Context matters - school, home, neighbourhood and policy. The varied situations in which home and schools operate call for different strategies and approaches to affect improvements (Hatton, 2001; O’Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996). Government policy must be seen as realistic and supportive of schools and parents working together rather than regarded as overbearing, overwhelming and inadequate. (Dellar, 1994; Hatton, 2001; and O’Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996)

Support: Support and resources from upper levels of government is necessary to help parents effectively contribute to school improvement efforts, especially for hard to reach parents. Parents, as well as teachers and administrators, need training and education

in facilitation, small group work, and communication strategies. Parents would also benefit from developing a greater understanding of curriculum issues. (Flinspach, et. al., 1992; Hatton, 2001)

Focus on Student Learning & Parent Involvement: The content of plans will effect outcomes. A focus on parent involvement, and teaching and learning may have positive outcomes (Flinspach, et. al., 1992; McInverney & Leach, 1992). It is imperative that real student and parent needs are assessed properly so that parent involvement strategies can be tailored to suit the individual situation. (Hatton, 2001).

Summary

This review has synthesized a broad array of literature related to school improvement. Beginning with the meaning of school improvement, the review summarized forms and effects of parent participation generally in schools. We described alternative approaches to school improvement and touched on the roles of parents in each alternative. Then we focused specifically on school improvement planning approaches and what we know about parent participation through this approach to school improvement, in particular, several broad conclusion are warranted by this evidence:

- Parents participate in schools in many different ways and encouraging such a wide range of involvement is likely helpful to a school's improvement efforts;
- Forms of parent participation which involve them directly, in the school or home, in the instruction of their children likely contribute most to student growth;
- The costs of parent participation are often significant. For example, such involvement can be very time consuming. Occasionally such involvement may spark conflicts between parents and teachers, as another example, but such conflicts can usually be managed and may be eliminated over time;
- Much of the success of parent participation in school depends on principals. When principals work to make such participation successful, it often is. But principals can easily present insurmountable obstacles to any kind of authentic involvement of parents.

B. Evidence from the Case Studies

3. Getting Started: First Round of Data Collection

More about the Schools and the Case Study Procedures

The schools. The schools were located almost equally in public and Catholic school districts. These were districts in the southern and central part of the province, but spread widely from east to west. The schools were located, in almost equal numbers, in urban, suburban and rural locations.

Schools' sizes ranged from a high of 800 students to a low of approximately 190 with a mean size of about 400 students. All of the schools were elementary, usually JK to grade 8 schools with one school having K to grade 3. Most were serving a high proportion of relatively needy students from lower income families. EQAO results indicate that a number of these schools are scoring below the provincial average, and several schools reported low levels of parent involvement in their children's' schoolwork, at the outset.

Two schools served largely francophone populations, and one school, a predominantly Portuguese population. For those schools about which such data were available, physical facilities were generally described as well maintained and several were relatively new. Of the four schools for which such data were provided, three reported relatively extensive parent involvement in the school generally, including an active school council. There was little evidence of any parent involvement in the fourth school.

School staffs were reported to be generally cohesive and congenial, and included one or more full time resource teacher, as well as a social worker, in several schools. Most of the principals of these schools were experienced. Only one principal seemed to be preoccupied with maintaining order in the school, and unable to play a significant role in the school improvement process. A second principal chose to remain apart from the improvement process in its early stages as a means of fostering greater staff and parent involvement and "ownership". In all other schools, the principal played an active and quite important role in both initiating and sustaining parent participation and the school improvement planning process, as a whole.

Only one school was described as having an ethos or climate other than quite positive. In this exceptional case, the ethos was described not only as unpleasant but as having a menacing air about it, as well.

In sum, the schools in which the study is being carried out seems to represent the kinds of schools in Ontario for which provincial achievement data suggests the greatest need for relatively aggressive school improvement initiatives.

Case study procedures. Before describing the results of the first round of case study evidence, we describe in a bit more detail here our overall methods for this and the subsequent three rounds of data collection. Data collected in each school were about parent involvement in school improvement planning, as well as the improvement planning and implementation processes more broadly. In each school, interview evidence such data were collected from members of the school council (administrators, teachers, and parents), as well as a small number

of parents and teachers who were not members of the council. Between 5 and 12 people have been interviewed in each school on four separate occasions. These four rounds of data collection occurred in the fall of 2000, the spring of 2001, the late winter of 2002 and the winter/spring of 2003.

The same interview protocols were used in each school, but the nature of the interviews changed from one data collection period to the next in order to track changes in the schools over a two year period. The interview protocols and selection of interviewees was designed to describe the state of school improvement initiatives in the fall of 2000, and then to capture changes between that period and the spring of 2003. Researchers took detailed notes during all interviews and ensured, as needed, the accuracy and completeness of these notes by reviewing audio-taped records made of each interview.

Documents from most schools were used to help build a picture of the starting point for school improvement planning and parent involvement in each school, the consequences of such planning to date, as well as the nature of the staff, school and community more generally. These documents often included the school's improvement plan, the notes or minutes of school council meetings conducted over the period of the study, evidence of progress being made, results of provincial tests, and the like. Schools were asked to provide documents they considered to be indicative of either their parent involvement and school improvement processes or the effects of those processes. A content analysis was conducted of such documents.

Interview and documentary evidence were analyzed for each school separately, first. These results were then aggregated across the ten schools and described in this and subsequent chapters of this section of our report around a set of common themes.

Round One: Getting Started

The first round of data collection occurred in the mid to late fall of 2000. Since the planning phase of the project in most schools was not completed until June 2000, most of these data were about that planning phase and the very early days of implementation. Our goal was to describe the improvement process in each of the case schools within a common framework. This goal was partially achieved with the round one data synthesized here, and missing data were provided through subsequent rounds of data collection. This chapter describes initial planning processes, and summarizes how the schools went about implementing their plans through the fall of 2000.

All of the evidence from the first round of data were provided through interviews with administrative staff, teachers, and parents. In the case of teachers and parents, both school council and non-school council members were interviewed. The total numbers of interviews conducted in each school ranged from 6 to 8.

How the Schools Developed Their Plans

In almost all of the schools, the principal was key to the initiation of school improvement planning. This took the form of bringing data about the school and its contribution to student

learning to the attention of staff and parents, taking the lead in applying for participation in the EIC-funded school improvement project, and bringing together staff and parents to begin discussions about school priorities. In one school, the principal developed a full-blown plan for initial consideration by staff and parents. In only one case did the principal not seem to be relatively central to the initial stages of the planning. Instead, she acted as a mediator between parents and teachers who themselves were the prime initiators of the plan.

While there was some disagreement among individual staff members, overall the EIC facilitators were considered to be quite central to the initial planning process and its success. Facilitators assisted in early meetings with teachers and parents, assisted principals in establishing a framework for the planning process, and offered a procedure to many of the schools for moving toward a manageable set of school improvement goals.

Teachers did not typically initiate the school improvement planning process, but in all schools they became involved in it quite quickly. Sometimes this was with representatives from the parent community in beginning to collect information about the school's needs. Teachers were almost always asked to volunteer to be part of one or more action teams to develop the school improvement plan.

The involvement of parents was relatively extensive in all but one school: that school strongly desired and actively sought out parent participation but only one parent persisted through the school improvement planning process. Parents were involved either right from the outset, with staff, in beginning to develop the plan, or they emerged as the initial planning process was brought to the attention of the school council. In most cases, parents had a substantial influence on the selection of school improvement goals.

The procedure used for arriving at both a set of directions or goals for school improvement planning and the more detailed set of actions to be taken to accomplish those goals was substantially influenced by the process most of the facilitators recommended. This process entailed looking closely at relevant evidence about the school and its performance (usually including EQAO data), involving most stakeholders in sifting through the data to identify an initial list of goals, and then engaging the same stakeholders in setting a small number of priorities for action (usually three or four).

The Plan Itself

All plans consisted of either three or four goals to serve as priorities for action. Additional elements of the plan were usually well described, including the strategies for accomplishing those goals, indicators of success, timelines, and roles and responsibilities. In one school, the plan explicitly called for the goals to be accomplished over a three to five year period.

The content of at least a subset of most schools' goals was very similar. Eight schools focused on some aspect of language, usually reading or writing. Mathematics was the focus in three schools, either math problem solving or terminology, and in two of the Catholic schools a goal concerning Catholic values and traditions was included in the plan. One school adopted a student discipline goal, another pre-school readiness, and a third school higher order thinking skills. Four schools included among their goals a concern for the attitudes of students and the

broader environment for learning in the school. Two schools included among their goals either providing general assistance to parents or helping the school community, more broadly, acquire tools useful to assist students in learning at school.

Initial Expectations

The first round of data collection provided information about participants' initial expectations for school improvement planning in eight of the ten schools. One aspect of these expectations had to do with certainty about what the outcomes might be from the school improvement planning process. A number of parents expressed uncertainty, and in these schools parents were pleasantly surprised by the concrete nature of what had been accomplished to date. A small number of teachers in at least three schools, because of negative previous experiences, expressed considerable skepticism about the improvement process and viewed it as a "paper exercise" that would be unlikely to significantly change the school. On the whole, however, interviewees generally had a clear notion of what they hoped for and were relatively optimistic about the chances of success.

Among the expectations mentioned at the outset were making a significant difference for student learning, something mentioned in about half the schools, and providing opportunities for involving parents more fully in the school's work, an expectation mentioned also in about half the schools. Other expectations included acquiring more resources for the school through EIC funding (four schools), creating opportunities to unify the staff, providing an outlet for parents to vent their frustrations with the school, and providing parents with an opportunity to learn more about the school, how to help their child, and in one case how to better understand the nature of student assessment being carried out by the school. Teachers in one school viewed the process as a way of developing both parents' and students' social competencies. A few teachers expected the process would create more work for them, something that did not thrill them.

Changing Expectations

In schools where such data were available, initial expectations were reported by the majority of respondents to have changed as the improvement process unfolded. For the most part, the school improvement process turned out to be more complicated, harder, and more time consuming than had been anticipated initially. On the other hand, there was a strong sentiment expressed by many respondents that the outcomes of the process to date were more substantial and useful than had been anticipated.

On a less positive note, there was some disappointment in one school about which goals were eligible for support through the school improvement plan, and frustration with the lack of additional funding that accompanied participation in the EIC project. Positive changes in expectations included reduced fear about the burden of being involved in the school improvement process, and several school staffs were pleasantly surprised by the general increase in parents' involvement in the school.

Extent to Which Expectations Have Been Met

Information about whether or not participants' expectations had been met were available for six of the ten schools. In all but one of these schools, parents and teachers expressed considerable satisfaction. What was being accomplished either met or exceeded their expectations, although in several cases the process was taking longer than they had initially anticipated. In one case, the school council chair expressed some disappointment about lack of support from the school district; something she had expected would be forthcoming. Interviewees in one school cited difficult labour relations as a reason why the planning process was proceeding less quickly than hoped.

While principals were generally satisfied, one expressed some disappointment that, although parents seemed quite pleased with the school's efforts, not many of them had chosen to become actively involved. Another principal believed it was a little early to tell whether his or her expectations would be met. In one school, the principal had not played a very central role in initiating the school improvement planning. Nevertheless, this principal indicated that he was very pleased with the outcomes of the project to date. This was in stark contrast to the views of teachers and parents in that school, who either gave the progress to date mixed reviews or expressed disappointment with the extent of the plan's implementation by the end of the first term.

Who Was Involved and How?

There was a dominant pattern of involvement on the part of principals, parents, teachers, the facilitator, and school councils in the process. Only one school mentioned the involvement of students directly.

Most principals exercised strong leadership in the initiation of the project, helped to create structures for planning, such as the school improvement teams and working committees, and fostered the participation of teachers and parents within these structures. Most principals participated extensively in all aspects of the school improvement planning process, although making efforts to not dominate discussions and decision making.

The dominant pattern of parent involvement entailed quite significant participation through school councils and, in many cases, as members of working teams within schools. Often, this was not a large number of parents, but their role seemed to be critical and their influence quite significant, nonetheless.

In almost all schools, teachers were central members of planning teams and influential members of the school council in discussions about the substance of school improvement planning. Teachers typically provided most of the input regarding curricular matters, with parents adding information concerning family background and their own expectations and aspirations.

School councils were key decision making groups in most schools, not usually undertaking school improvement planning directly, but acting as a sounding board for working teams within the school and a location for approval of school improvement plans.

EIC facilitators typically were involved in the very early stages of planning, often worked closely with the principal in helping frame the planning process, and participated in working groups as they began to clarify their priorities for the plan and to develop procedures for accomplishing those priorities. Their work was almost always seen as extremely important to the success of the planning activities.

The dominant pattern of involvement described above is fairly representative of what transpired in seven of the ten schools.

What Worked Well, Not so Well, and What Changes Were Suggested?

A considerable degree of consensus emerged about aspects of the planning process that were helpful. Working in small groups on clearly defined tasks was one aspect of the process mentioned in several schools; the smallness of these groups allowed both teachers and parents to interact more freely and in a less self-conscious way, initially. A second feature strongly valued in three schools was the availability of “hard data” on the schools and the students’ performance at the beginning of the planning process; such data provided much needed clarity about priorities for the school. Parent involvement was viewed as both a positive and negative aspect of the process; positive when sufficient numbers of parents were able to be involved, and negative when only a few appeared to participate.

Respondents from several schools pointed to the sharing of ideas among teachers, and between teachers and parents, as an aspect of the process that seemed very positive, and from which they learned a great deal. Among other features of the process identified as positive were the availability of additional funds, and in all but one case, the facilitator. In one school where the facilitator was viewed, by a small number of parents, as not key, it was only because they believed that the principal could have facilitated the process herself.

The voluntary nature of the project was cited as important in one school, and in another school there was some debate about whether voting on priorities was useful or not. The staff in one school, along with the principal, identified their habit of returning to discussions about improvement priorities and processes at every staff meeting as an important way in which to move forward with implementation of the plan, and a key way of ensuring that the staff, as a whole, became and remained committed to the plan.

A number of suggestions were made for improving the process: allowing more time for the planning process to unfold; having more people involved in the process, especially parents; and a less intrusive role for teachers in meetings that included both parents and teachers. The refusal of a very small number of parents to consider the challenges of the school as a whole, rather than only the needs of their own children was cited as a problem in one school. Other problems included the start time for the project (the spring); and the lack of support for the process on the part of a small number of staff in one school.

Recommendations were made by respondents to keep the number of initiatives in the school improvement plan manageable in size, to work toward having input from a large proportion of staff members, to increase the amount of time available for planning, and to extend the time over which the school improvement plan would be scheduled.

Implementation

How Have You Implemented the Plan So Far?

In most schools, the implementation phase began with dissemination of information about the plan to staff members, parents, and others who had not been involved in the early planning phases. The form of this dissemination ranged from extremely high profile to relatively low-key. At the high profile end of the continuum, one school launched their school improvement plan with a major meeting, attended by an EIC commissioner, school district board members (including the chair), the planning facilitator, and school council members. At this school, copies of the improvement goals and the school profile also were distributed to each student's family in September of 2000 followed by the monthly publication of a newsletter, and the convening of parent workshops related to the goals in the school improvement plan. In the future, this school intends to post information about progress on their website, and schedule a fairly intense series of additional data collection activities. The principal was cited as key in communicating about the school improvement plan and demonstrating a high level of ongoing commitment to the plan. Within the school, teachers were implementing the plan on a divisional basis. Most other schools introduced the plan to groups of staff members, groups of parents, and school council members with much less fanfare.

Beyond the initial launch of the plan, most schools followed up with a series of meetings, the posting of progress in school newsletters and, in one case, the development of several new policies legitimating key aspects of the plan. In one school, use of the physical facilities was altered so as to better reflect the goals of the plan. Respondents in about half of the schools pointed to some form of staff development activity as an important part of the implementation phase and the greater involvement of parents was noted to be an important feature for successful implementation in almost half the schools.

In addition to such school-level activity, in a number of schools individual teachers were moving piecemeal on aspects of the plan most relevant to them. Several schools were reported to be making considerable progress toward one of the goals in their plan, but had become stalled in pursuing the remainder. One school cited job action as a reason for being stalled in this way. Providing release time for teachers on a continuous basis was considered, by respondents in four schools, as an important aspect of implementation success.

Who Has Been Involved in Implementation So Far?

Principals, individual teachers, groups of teachers, parents, school council members, social workers, board level personnel, student representatives on the school council, and other community members were involved in implementation in at least one of the ten schools. Among these roles and groups, principals, teachers and parents were the most frequently mentioned, with principals often viewed as the driving force to keep implementation alive and moving forward, sometimes through difficult periods (such as work to rule on the part of teachers).

Teachers were viewed as critical to the plan's implementation at the classroom level, not surprisingly, and for the most part seemed to be working toward implementation of at least some of the goals in their school's improvement plans. Parents in several schools increasingly were finding ways to assist in implementing the plan through providing assistance at school and in the home.

In one school, the principal and the vice principal recruited new staff members specifically with the improvement plan in mind; pursued funding for professional development, additional time, and resources; improved communication with parents; and developed closer working relationships with community agencies that could provide support for families. In this school, the leadership team (seven or eight people) that had developed the plan continued to monitor progress with the plan and to encourage the involvement of other staff members in the implementation of the plan.

What Has Been the Impact of Implementation on the School so Far?

Respondents from only half of the schools provided information about impact, partly because of the early stage of implementation when this first round of data were collected. Nevertheless, two or more schools did report greater parent involvement in the school, and better informed parents who were more supportive of the school's mission. Teachers in the majority of schools were reported to be more focused and working together cohesively in teams. Several schools reported students working at higher academic levels, two schools noting improved EQAO scores. Students in two schools were reported to be exercising more discipline, and engaged in less disruptive behaviour. In one school the school improvement plan was cited as the cause of improved student attendance and reduced tardiness, along with better homework completion rates.

Respondents in half the schools said that a more cooperative working relationship had developed between the teachers and parents, and that teachers had learned more about new programs and instructional strategies as a result of their involvement in the implementation of the plan. Several respondents in one school pointed to an improved school climate, while those in another claimed greater ownership of the school improvement plan by the school council, a group now working more productively with both staff and students.

What Worked Well and Not So Well?

When asked about what worked well to implement their improvement plans, respondents from at least two schools pointed to the increase in parent involvement in the school and efforts to do that. These people also cited efforts to increase communication with parents, as well as with the larger community, through the use of the school newsletter, for example.

Efforts to encourage teacher and parent collaboration were reported to be successful, as were teachers working together. The support of principals was viewed as important to the success of implementation initiatives by many respondents, and efforts to both monitor the process and provide release time to teachers for their planning and implementation efforts were

reported as important, also. Respondents from one school pointed to the importance of developing a distinct role for parents, and the success the school had achieved in providing resources to support implementation. These resources were aimed at helping parents and students deal with family issues. In another school, mention was made of the contribution to the improvement process of having quite specific timelines and indicators of success along the way.

Respondents in individual schools, in response to a question about what had not worked well (presented hurdles), identified lack of parent involvement, lack of the timely arrival of curriculum and test materials, lack of sufficient funding, and an inappropriate timeline for the beginning of the project. Teachers in several schools claimed an increase in their stress resulting from the introduction of the school improvement process; these teachers viewed the process as another layer of accountability and an intensification of their role.

What Advice Would You Have for Others?

When asked to provide advice to others about embarking on a systematic school improvement process, respondents provided a long list of suggestions. Identified by respondents in at least three schools were the following:

- encouraging parent involvement in the process;
- communicating about the school's improvement plans with parents and other members of the community;
- keeping the school improvement plan simple and small;
- being very specific about the goals of the plan; and
- keeping involvement in the plan voluntary.

Mentioned by respondents in only one or two schools was the following advice:

- be patient;
- encourage ownership in the plan on the part of teachers, parents, and others;
- be realistic about what can be accomplished and the amount of time it will take to accomplish it;
- make sure you've got a really good principal;
- do whatever you can to sharpen the clarity and focus of the school improvement effort;
- use an external facilitator if you are able to;
- make sure the plan is tailor-made to the school's needs and suits the context in which the students and families find themselves;
- use systematic data to help both identify problems the plan should address, and to monitor progress in resolving those problems;
- build on the strengths of the school and what it is already doing;
- acknowledge the progress that is being made and the contribution people are making to that progress; and
- be open-minded and accepting of ideas for the plan at the outset.

Conclusion

While this chapter summarized the results of only the first round of data collection, there are some tentative suggestions about what answers might be provided eventually in response to two of the four questions guiding the study.

The first of these questions is about effective ways of involving stakeholders in school improvement efforts. Parents are often not easy to involve, especially those who are not comfortable in the school to begin with. No one method has emerged yet as clearly useful, and the use of many different methods is likely the best answer so far. In contrast, parents with the time and inclination to participate contribute best when they are included as full members of planning teams. As well, parent participation on school councils, when those councils serve a steering function, seems to make the most of their contributions. Such a direct oversight or steering function does seem the best way for school councils to contribute to the improvement process.

A second research question asked about the impact of school improvement planning processes on students and schools. Our preliminary evidence was encouraging: planning processes were associated with increased team work by staffs, greater clarity of purpose, a sense of urgency about the challenge, and the uncovering of obstacles schools should be addressing that might otherwise have been overlooked. All of these organizational outcomes have the potential to improve the educational experiences of students and several schools have claimed that such improvements are already evident.

A third research question concerns effective strategies for increasing the involvement of parents in their children's education (as distinct from involvement in school improvement processes). At this early stage, our own data said little about this matter and it received more attention in subsequent phases of our work.

4. Gaining Momentum: Second Round of Data Collection

Our goal is to describe the progress of the school improvement planning (SIP) process in the case schools using a common framework. Five main stages of the SIP were identified in our literature review: adoption, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The first round of data collection concentrated on the adoption/planning stages and on the early implementation phase covering the period of spring 2000 to late fall 2000. The second round of data collection occurred in the late spring of 2001 in May and June, and focused on the first year of implementation of the school improvement initiative. In this section, we summarize our findings by question across nine schools. One school did not schedule round two interviews since first round interviews had only just been completed as the school came to our research project later than the other schools.

All of the evidence from the second round of data collection was provided through interviews with administrative staff, teachers, and parents. In the case of teachers and parents, those actively involved in school councils or school improvement teams and those who did not participate in these decision-making forums were interviewed, whenever possible. The total numbers of interviews conducted in each school ranged from 5 to 10.

The First Year of Implementation

An Overview

In all of the schools, progress had been made on the school improvement initiative in varying degrees. All but one of the schools seemed to have many projects well underway or completed. Interviewees eagerly talked about the types of activities undertaken and the positive results for their schools. However, in one school, protracted contract negotiations between the Board and teachers' union, with work-to-rule or job sanctions, interfered with teachers' ability to actively participate in projects during the fall so that progress was described as slow or limited. Most of the interviewees in the other schools seemed pleased, or even ecstatic in terms of some parents' views, with what had been accomplished to meet the goals set out in their school plans.

Participants liked the collaborative nature of the SIP process. They appreciated the chance to work together and to gain understanding about each other's views and school needs. There were many more people involved as tasks and activities were implemented. The "doing" stage required and fostered more involvement than the "planning" phase. When results were evident, this encouraged more participation.

However, even with the many successes enjoyed by most of the schools, some were struggling with meeting at least one of their goals. In three schools, interviewees expressed discontent with the results of parent involvement efforts. Participants suggested that their

expectations may have been too high, or their strategies were too focused on getting parents into the school and they may have to be revised. In one school, they had trouble coming to an understanding of, and planning action on, the “higher order thinking skills” goal. In another school, the “Catholicity” goal did not work as well as they had hoped so they planned to revise it.

What Was Learned as a Result of the Experience?

The main learning was that implementation was difficult requiring many individuals to expend a great deal of effort and time. But it was considered well worth the effort. There was value in having a plan that focused and organized school-wide action and ownership on common goals. The process cannot be rushed: groundwork needed to be laid before results could be seen. Teachers, parents, administration, and, in some instances, students appreciated the chance to work together to develop understanding and commitment to the goals and to each other. Participants talked about the mutual respect that developed during the process. Teachers appreciated having release time to participate in SIPP meetings and activities, although this was not always available.

The content of the school improvement plan was important. It needed to address priority issues according to school community participants, and to be well defined and detailed but to be adjustable as well. Participants emphasized that plans must be realistic and not overly ambitious. It was considered better to focus on doing a few things well, and on building credibility by accomplishing what was possible than trying to do too much, too soon. Flexibility in implementation allowed changes to be made as new demands arose or as the monitoring/evaluation process suggested revision was indicated. It proved difficult to plan in the long range with uncertain future funding so some plans and activities had to be curtailed.

The importance of ongoing monitoring of SIP processes was noted by many. Schools were busy places coping with many changes and challenges: SIP activities had to compete with many other items associated with day to day operations. Monitoring and evaluating on a regular basis helped some schools to keep SIP on the front burner rather than languishing on the back. In some schools, there were plans to evaluate the process by the end of the year. The improvement initiative helped school personnel to develop assessment tools and skills.

The need for someone or some group to oversee the SIP was emphasized in most schools. In many cases, an energetic principal played this role but in a few of schools, a team undertook this responsibility. According to respondents, the value of a grass roots approach to overseeing the project was that it divided the work, and it increased understanding of and commitment to the initiative.

Some schools found it challenging to involve parents in SIP processes. However, school staff and parents were discovering what worked and what did not work. It was difficult to schedule meetings between parents and teachers. In one case, this was because many parents’ jobs entailed shift work. It was hard to change traditional parental views of educational roles with teachers in charge of the school domain and with parents taking responsibility for home matters. This was more of a problem with the general parent community not with school council members. Some parents resisted the idea that they should take more responsibility for their

children's education. It takes time to change attitudes. However, many more parents seemed to be taking a more active educative role at home or at school. Involved parents seemed to be learning more about the "global picture" of schooling and what was required to help all children learn.

Other learning less frequently mentioned included: students can do more than adults thought possible; the importance of staffing the right person for the right job as a job switch led to significant progress on a project that previously was going nowhere; and personal growth and learning.

Who Contributed to Implementing the Plan?

The implementation stage provided increased opportunities to involve more people in the tasks and responsibilities than during the planning stage--particularly more teachers, and surprisingly to some, more students. However, principals and teachers were the dominant players in decision-making or leading and in implementing. With a couple of exceptions, parents and school councils mainly were involved in implementing activities. In two of the schools, students played a significant role in leadership. In three of the schools, students participated in projects such as peer tutoring, and student supervision. Participants in implementation seemed very busy and productive with division of responsibilities for tasks.

Teachers and the principals carried a heavy workload in this stage with many tasks focused on classroom learning (eg. literacy or math) or school-wide projects (eg. student behaviour/attitude or parent involvement). A few teachers took on leadership roles. One teacher, as a personal growth goal, led the school action team with impressive results. Other teachers led smaller sub-committees around specific functions or tasks. Most teachers attended meetings - staff, division, action or school improvement team, and school council - to discuss projects and progress, and to make plans and revisions as necessary. They were responsible for implementing many items such as parent handbooks, math and literacy initiatives, and student behaviour projects.

In most cases, the principal played a key role in overseeing the project and results by coordinating activities, by keeping the project on track and focused, and by monitoring results. Participants enthusiastically talked about the leadership shown by their principal that enabled them to work on the project. Principal demonstrated their commitment and motivated staff by their hard work and by their support of the project and people. They handled some projects by themselves. They obtained resources so that activities could go ahead as planned. They arranged for release time to enable teachers to participate in meetings and in project follow-through. Sometimes they did this by taking classes themselves, by arranging for within school relief, or by hiring supply teachers. Principals organized professional development opportunities for staff and training for parents. Many principals set the school tone in terms of making parents feel welcome. Their role as liaison was instrumental in communicating with parents, teachers, and the community about project happenings.

Parents' roles varied in the implementation stage. In the main they were less involved in decision-making activities such as developing policy or monitoring and revising plans than they

had been in the planning stage. In one school, parents through their school council played a lead role in decisions about implementation. In another school, parents were members of the action team who kept an eye on progress. In most other schools, parents carried out many projects according to what had been previously decided in school plans. School councils and the parent community received updates on SIP activities. School councils organized parent events.

The numbers and types of parent involvement increased in most school and the type of activity influenced the numbers of parents involved. For example, many parents (sometimes up to a few hundred) attended parent events such as barbecues, dances, and curriculum nights. There were increased numbers of parents involved in activities such as driving. One school saved an estimated \$10,000 by having parents drive. Children at this school were able to participate in activities that, otherwise, the school would not have been able to afford. Parents also supervised field trips, made presentations at career days, fundraised, and helped children with learning in the school and at home. It is interesting to note that there was substantially increased activity in parent involvement at the school that suffered under the work to rule situation as parents tried to take on what they could to help the children.

In a third of the schools, participants mentioned the role played by the school board in providing resources for the project. In these cases, board consultants provided resource people for school workshops on topics such as literacy.

Factors that Fostered Participation in SIP

Interviewees cited many positive factors and a few negative factors contributing to their participation. These factors have been grouped into categories and are reported in order of number of times mentioned: organization of the process, resources and support, nature of the school community, collaboration, leadership by the principal, communication, visibility, education, norms, the school council, and constructive approach.

Factors most often mentioned by interviewees as important concerned organizational aspects of the school improvement planning process. They appreciated having clear roles and responsibilities so that accountability was enhanced. Division of tasks allowed the workload to be divided among increased numbers of participants. They thought that having a “reasonable” plan was key, since schools are busy places, it is necessary to concentrate effort on priority items so that people do not get overwhelmed with the workload. Having a plan provided a sense of direction and a vehicle for unifying perspectives. Using data on children’s learning and student achievement gave a focus for action and for evaluation of results.

Be organized but remain flexible was a key message. It was necessary to be flexible to accommodate parents’ and teachers’ schedules in setting up meetings. Flexibility about revising the plan was recognized as valuable. Monitoring the process through regular school council meetings or other means ensured that action was being tracked so that what worked could be recognized and what did not work could be changed.

Another very critical grouping of factors was resources and support. This was especially important to help teachers’ contributions to SIP. Teachers appreciated having the time to meet and to work on school improvement initiatives. The provision of supply teachers or other

methods of providing release time enabled teachers to work together during the busy school day: this increased involvement by teachers generally and facilitated the implementation/monitoring process. Teachers saw that time spent on SIP was valued. Teachers were grateful for the professional development opportunities through SIP, both formal workshops and the informal learning from each other and the process. They valued the mentorship provided and having access to experts. Having support materials and resources was crucial to enable teachers to carry out a wide array of SIP activities.

The nature of the school community was cited as another important set of factors. This category included school staff, parents and students. People enjoyed having a welcoming atmosphere at school, one in which adults were content, hard working, approachable and caring, and students were happy. A cohesive staff that worked together well on mutually agreed upon goals was helpful. When everyone was committed and motivated, they took action and followed through on plans.

The nature of the parent community was cited as both a positive and negative category of factors. Parents were appreciated when they participated in, and supported the SIP, and when they had the time to help and to financially support the school. But, sometimes parents did not have the time to participate because of their other roles and responsibilities. They also did not participate as much as their children became older. Parents did tend to get involved if their child had a problem. Some would come to the school to help if invited specifically. Some would come to workshops, particularly when food and babysitting were provided. Parents tended to be more motivated to be involved at the beginning of the year than at the end of the year. Some parents had sufficient confidence and education to participate easily and well.

The surrounding community had an impact on parent participation. For example, one small school was situated in a very small and stable community where everyone knew each other. This led to a sense of ownership and identification with the school so that involvement was facilitated. However, at a large school located in a community with many newcomers who spoke languages other than English and who were very mobile, there was little connection with the school.

The value of collaboration was noted in many schools. It was important that all parties had input so that they would feel included and would have a sense of ownership in the process. Through collaboration, mutual understanding and respect developed. Parents became more aware of school issues and school staff gained insight into family situations. Parents and staff developed a better understanding of their shared responsibility for all children's education.

The principal was seen as a motivating force for participation and for successful implementation by many interviewees. When the principal was hardworking, enthusiastic, supportive and encouraged ownership, parents and staff were motivated to do more. The principal kept others informed about happenings and played a gatekeeping role by encouraging participation in the school.

Communication was a factor that increased awareness, understanding and motivation to be involved. While this was often the job of the principal, interviewees also mentioned the role of teachers in communication (e.g. making "good news" phone calls to parents). Parents also helped with communication matters.

Another factor that impacted on participants' motivation to be involved and to do well was visibility. Interviewees believed that the profile of the SIP project increased commitment and effort. Also people thought it was good for the children to see how the community was taking an interest in their education.

Other factors that influenced contributions to SIP (noted in single cases) included: using a constructive approach (i.e. trying to be positive rather than negative); building norms of parent involvement into the school and the community; having a school council that played an active role in planning, implementing and monitoring; and seeing SIP as an opportunity for professional growth and development.

Several factors inhibiting participation were identified by interviewees including time and workload concerns, lack of commitment on the part of some teachers, lack of supply teachers, turnover of staff, and issues surrounding parent involvement including the challenge of having parents and teachers on the same committee, the mobile nature of some parent communities, language barriers, and other obligations such as full-time work.

Other Ways Schools Could Help Participants Contribute Effectively to SIP

Interviewees had a number of ideas about what schools could do to help them and others to be able to contribute effectively in SIP. The most frequently named item in all schools was time. Teachers would like more time to meet, to plan, and to review actions. They said they needed time for sharing ideas and for professional development. Professional development could be job-embedded, using in-school, between school, or out-of-school resources. Innovative ways need to be found to ease teachers' workloads so that they can more easily participate. More board and provincial support is needed in this regard. Perhaps, professional activity time could be allocated to school improvement activities. Re-culturing and restructuring of schools may be required. Respondents also suggested that schools need to exercise flexibility in arranging meeting times to accommodate parents' and teachers' schedules.

Interviewees asked for a more stable work environment. Recent tensions across the province are not conducive to active involvement in school improvement. The pace of curricular change is difficult to cope with, especially with the decrease in professional activity time. Labour relations clashes have developed as a consequence of inadequate funding. Interviewees daydreamed about more money, smaller classes, less high-needs students, less demands and a handpicked staff. But, to be realistic in terms of funding, they would be pleased to have dependable funding over a longer period of time. Adequate resources to help them fulfil their plans would be helpful.

Another major way in which schools can foster greater participation in SIP is to improve communications with parents. There needs to be more periodic updates on SIP for parents. Schools need to reach out to parents in other languages than English at meetings and in writing. Schools have to find methods of communicating with parents who work fulltime, perhaps by using the students' daily agenda books and by employing parent satisfaction surveys.

Participants offered other ideas about parent involvement. Some just wanted schools to encourage a better turnout of parents. Others talked about the need to reach out to hard to serve

parents e.g. full-time workers, those who do not speak English, and some stay-at-home parents who do not recognize that parents have a role to play in educating children. Parent involvement needs more support by schools, boards and the province. Parents need better communication and interaction with teachers.

Perhaps, said our respondents, schools need to focus less on parent involvement in the schools and more on parent involvement in the home. Parents were believed to need more training and education about how to help their children at home or at school. After-school activities and tutoring would be helpful. When participating in projects such as SIP, parents need information, and guidance that is presented in layman's terms, perhaps from local resource people. A high profile member of the community whose opinion is respected could be used to explain how valuable it is for parents to take an active role in their children's education.

In several schools, participants suggested doing more to involve the community.

Schools must be good neighbours and reach out to the community. They need to be flexible to accommodate neighbours. Existing partnerships in the community are helpful but they could be expanded and new partnership could be developed, according to some respondents.

Several improvements to the SIP process were suggested. There could be more networking between the SIP schools to share information and ideas. To address concerns about overcrowded agendas at teachers' meetings, it was suggested that separate meetings devoted to SIP be held. Alternatively, SIP could be a separate item on the agenda for teacher's meeting.

Interviewees thought the SIP process was valuable and could be productively used in other schools. All schools should have a plan developed by stakeholders, which sets priorities and encourages shared commitment and momentum. The process followed of developing a plan, employing action teams, oversight by the principal, using a facilitator, etc. worked well. Therefore, other schools should be encouraged to use the process. A comfortable atmosphere that encourages open mindedness, open dialogue, trust, and compromise, without personal agendas, helps people to contribute.

Changes in People and Structures

Overall, organization of the projects remained largely the same as what was in place in the initial planning stage at four of the schools. Interviewees at five of the schools reported that there had been some change in structural organization of the project.

Initially, all schools had some sort of committee structure with representatives from parents, teachers and administration to devise the plan. In some cases, this was a single school improvement team while in many schools, there were multiple committees formed to address each of the SIP goals. Teachers were consistent members of these committees and parents and administrators were on most committees, as well.

During the implementation stage, some schools began to use existing school structures such as staff and divisional meetings, and school council meetings for discussing progress. When a special school improvement team was not in place, the principal retained responsibility for ensuring that progress was being made on the plan and for giving SIP updates at staff or parent meetings, or in school communications. In many instances, it appeared that parents did not play

as active a part in implementation committees as teachers. However, in one case where there was an action team in place but it had not been meeting, the school council revised one of the plan's goals that was not working well. In another school, the council took on a key role in implementation by reviewing and revising the plan, by examining EQAO results, by creating a sub-committee, and by exploring possible tools for tracking progress of the plan.

Many of the schools reported some change in personnel from the planning stage to the implementation phase of the SIP. Some schools had new faces but the same numbers of participants. Some staff left schools and were replaced. Principals were often involved in orienting new staff and in arranging for their inclusion on committees or activities. In many schools, more staff, if not all staff, became involved during implementation. In a few schools, more parents became involved in decision-making than previously was the case.

Some positive comments were made about the way that the structures and the people involved operated. Where teachers, parents and administrations were working together, participants reported that their expectations of each other were clarified and changed, that their roles were better understood, and that planning and action improved. The increase in involvement by parents and by teachers had a positive effect on enthusiasm, ownership and sharing of the workload.

A few concerns about the operation of the structures and the people involved were noted. In a few schools, the future departure of key staff and the principal was a concern. In schools with no formal meeting on a regular basis, concerns included the lack of opportunity to review results. Sometimes this was because people just did not know what was happening so they felt like things were not progressing. Updates from the principal did not seem adequate. People wondered if there would be more ownership, and better understanding and communication, if they returned to a team based SIP structure.

Some noted problems with inadequate evaluation. There was a need to look at the impact of the plan's activities on a school-wide basis but this did not occur in one school.

Accounting for Success

All schools reported successes with progress toward some, if not all, of their goals. Areas of achievement according to interviewees included: increased student and parent involvement; literacy, science and math programs; religious education; student behaviour/attitude programs; homework policy; and better awareness and communication.

In explaining these successes, interviewees echoed many reasons cited earlier. Most frequently mentioned was a collaborative approach, which fostered commitment, ownership and concentrated effort on priorities. Sometimes activities were contentious, but working together helped to clarify concerns, to increase understanding and to arrive at workable agreements and plans. Interviewees appreciated the personal qualities of the people involved: they described the great, hardworking, and knowledgeable staff who were enthusiastic, dedicated, and willing to undertake tasks. The role of the principal in communicating and monitoring regarding the process, and in inspiring and empowering staff, students and parents was important. Teachers,

who took the initiative and who followed through on implementation, were regarded as instrumental in success.

Frequently cited as breeding success were the resources provided to the schools. Training and professional development by board staff helped teachers to learn new approaches to teaching. Extra staffing eased workloads and furnished new knowledge and skills. At one school, a board supplied social worker helped with the student behaviour and attitude goal by consulting carefully with teachers about needs and results. Money from the Education Improvement Commission was used to purchase targeted materials and supplies.

The role of parents was considered important to achievement. Principals and teachers appreciated the increase in parental support and understanding. Parents began to take more initiative. They became more comfortable at the schools. Invitations and positive feedback from teachers, principals and parents aided this process. Parents learned to work harmoniously with each other and with staff. They saw the value of planning in advance and of taking action in needed areas. School councils played a more active role in school life and their activities were more student-learning focused.

Another major reason for success was the school improvement planning process, itself. Interviewees said that having a reasonable plan provided focus, identified needs and developed support for action. It laid out clear roles and responsibilities. Monitoring and evaluating results aided in the recognition and revision process.

Difficulties

At one of the schools, no difficulties were identified. At four of the schools, at least some of the interviewees, mainly parents, did not see any real difficulties either. However, other interviewees identified significant challenges.

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges related to time, resources and workload. Considering everything that schools need to do, it was difficult to cope with competing demands with limited resources. Therefore, in some cases, the school improvement initiative was pushed to the backburner. School improvement requires a great deal of time and energy. School structures were not set up to properly support SIP. Teachers and parents needed time to work on SIP activities together. Another challenge, related to the context in which schools are operating, was the work-to-rule or sanctions in one school; this interfered with teachers' ability to participate in SIP and had negative carry-over effect on morale and on SIP implementation.

Other difficulties had to do with the school improvement planning process. Some problems concerned the content of SIP, interviewees noting that emphasizing certain goals caused other areas to suffer. One interviewee thought that the school should be aligning SIP more closely with EQAO results. Some goals were not completed for various reasons; several interviewees thought some goals were too ambitious or unreasonable. Some thought the process was too slow. There were problems with the monitoring and evaluation process. Some schools did not have adequate structures in place to monitor or to evaluate the initiative. Some schools felt they lacked assessment knowledge or tools to properly evaluate the process. There was a need to have baseline data and to collect data on an ongoing basis but this would require much time and effort.

One interviewee wondered if there were too many variables involved in student learning to be sure of results. This person also questioned the effect or results of having many student transfers. One person said that SIP did not seem to have a school-wide impact. In some cases, there was not enough monitoring and evaluating, and this allowed SIP to be swallowed up by the day-to-day routines in the school.

In over half of the schools, difficulties related to parent involvement emerged. In some instances, parent involvement expectations were not fulfilled. Some schools did not get the numbers of parents involved that they would have liked. Some wondered if their goals were unrealistic or needed revision. For example, in two schools, goals focused on bringing parents to the school and interviewees wondered if more focus should be put on parent involvement at home. More and better forms of communication with parents were required. Parents needed specific information about the benefits of school events and parent involvement. It was hard to reach out to some parent communities because of such barriers as language and cultural differences, mobility, other roles and responsibilities, apathy, and lack of understanding of the parental role in education. Parent education and training was needed.

In terms of parent involvement in SIP, the school council or parent role in decision-making was sometimes problematic. One parent wondered about how to properly involve parents in decision-making processes. In her school parents had little decision-making responsibility as the school council tended to “rubber stamp” the ideas and actions of the very able staff and principal. Moreover, the general parent body did not appear to be interested in policy development. In another school, one teacher wondered about the value of having parents on planning committees, since they did not understand classroom teaching and some had personal agendas. However, parents themselves regarded parent involvement in the planning committees as a key ingredient to success. In some cases, it was difficult to schedule meetings between teachers and parents.

A future concern was the turnover of staff at schools. This was particularly worrisome when it was the principal who would be leaving since the school improvement initiative might suffer without the leadership, guidance and support provided by these individuals. The up-coming departure of other staff who had taken on leadership responsibility was seen as problematic for project momentum and continuity.

Conclusion

Our conclusions here are well reflected in respondents’ answers to our question about what they would do if they were starting over. Most interviewees would follow a similar process if they were doing it again. However, many suggested they would take time to observe first in order to develop some perspective about the needs and the interests of the school community. Then, the gatekeepers (i.e. the Principal and the school council) could be approached to determine their willingness to participate. Some interviewees suggested using the excellent school improvement handbook produced by the Education Improvement Commission as a reference guide.

Interviewees were emphatic that everyone in the school community should be encouraged to be involved in developing and in implementing the plan. Communication is a big element in

developing awareness and understanding. Some recommended taking more time to discuss needs and ideas, and to build commitment by all. People thought the collaborative team approach was very valuable and should be used in all stages of the SIPP. Leadership should be shared by teachers and by parents as this fosters ownership and personal growth. The initial selection of the committee(s) should be carefully considered so that people who have the right information and skills, and who are committed will be chosen. Several participants thought students should and could be effectively involved in school improvement initiatives. Involving more parents educated them about their role and about how they can help specifically. Using a facilitator who encourages parents and other participants to talk is helpful. It is important to have a good parent council who welcomes other parents.

The content of the plan should be realistic containing both curricular and non-curricular goals that are specific and can be measured over a period of time. Activities should be coordinated and integrated so that the workload does not become unmanageable. The timing of the project should suit the school schedule: some recommended beginning in the fall as opposed to the spring.

Resources would have to be arranged so that stakeholders, especially teachers, can be effectively involved. Release time should be offered to teachers. People thought that having a facilitator and resource staff were essential. Administrative support is key so having a good principal who stays for the duration of the project would be useful. Adequate supplies and materials to complete projects should be provided.

Participants talked about the need for action and for evaluation. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the process should be in place. Some thought having the same committee(s) throughout the process would offer continuity, although this method was not used in all schools.

Other suggestions advanced by interviewees included: developing better SIP guidelines for parents with less jargon; focusing on areas in which the school is already working but establish new objectives; integrating things so it is not a lot of extra work; decreasing testing time; and reducing outside initiatives that get in the way of schools meeting local needs.

One principal observed that the nature of the change process should be recognized. There is an ebb and a flow to the process that spans at least three to five years in which commitment is built and ideas are tried. It cannot be rushed. Participants will need practice, perseverance, commitment, receptivity, flexibility, and the ability to accept constructive criticism.

At the end of the first year of implementation, most interviewees remained optimistic about their progress. While many challenges were evident to them by this time, especially how much time was required and how little they could find, most challenges were viewed as “not fatal” to SIP.

Principals remained key to the process, as they had been from the outset, and parents emerged in some teachers’ views as perhaps surprisingly helpful. Some teachers, however, still did not see a central role for parents in the “nuts and bolts” of SIP implementation. Considering how parents could be more helpful at home had begun to surface as an important issue for some parents and staff.

5. Sustaining Momentum and Running Out of Steam: Third Round of Data Collection

The third round of data collection, describing the second year of implementation, focused on further implementation efforts, as well as monitoring and evaluation progress. Data were collected in the late winter or spring of 2002. We summarize findings from eight of the ten schools. One school did not complete third round interviews (it was threatened with closure) while in a second school, interviews were only partly completed because of a school emergency. The total number of interviews conducted in each school ranged from 5-10 as in round two.

The Second Year of Implementation

Overview

This round of interviews revealed a different picture of progress as compared with round two interviews. In round two, focused on early implementation, most of the schools seemed to be making good progress. But interviews about the second year of implementation indicated that progress had become difficult to sustain in the majority of schools.

At three of the schools, good progress continued to be made in the second year of implementation with goals related to literacy, student behaviour, parent involvement, and Catholicity. In these schools, the improvement plan was a high priority for their community and so received considerable attention. Implementation of the plan was monitored, evaluated and revised as needed. Communication of results was considered important for building commitment and for sharing learning.

Interviewees at the five remaining schools reported fair to little progress at best on their school improvement initiatives. These schools experienced such challenges as: staff changes (which were most problematic when this entailed the principal); lack of time; competing demands from the Board or the government; lack of attention to SIP; labour relations difficulties as a result of contract negotiations; the nature of the community in which the school was situated; and the characteristics of the school e.g. large size. These schools were beginning to “run out of steam”.

Learning as a Result of This Experience

Interviewees’ reflections on their learning from this most recent school improvement experience have been classified as: school improvement planning process, time and work, leadership, learning opportunity, commitment and continuity.

Many of the interviewees’ comments about learning from their most recent experience with school improvement had to do with the SIP itself. Having a plan helped to build and maintain a cohesive school community. Having common goals and a vision for addressing student needs

bound the community together and helped them to work in harmony. Having a plan gave focus to committee work and helped to reduce conflict.

Parents could see that schools were trying to improve in order to benefit students. Participants saw the value of having a doable plan with realistic timelines. In some schools, plans and activities were monitored, evaluated and revised on an ongoing basis using data collected from a variety of sources. The monitoring process helped to identify what was working and what was not working. Sometimes, letting go of unreasonable expectations was difficult. Sometimes, being realistic meant dropping objectives or activities. Monitoring the plan also made advancements more transparent and that served as a motivating force for some.

Participants found that implementing school improvement took a considerable amount of time and work. It was difficult for schools to cope with their many everyday demands and to find time, as well, for getting together to work on SIP. Progress was slow. Some interviewees wondered if parent participation might be adversely effected by the slowness of the process, since children may move on to higher levels of schooling before the results of current efforts could be realized. However, interviewees stressed that working together on SIP was essential. One principal thought that three years was too long a time frame for an improvement project because it was difficult to maintain momentum, from year to year, with staff changes and with competing demands from the board and the province. A few other individuals opined that the context in which schools operated affected their ability to focus on their plans.

Interviewees learned that good leadership was critical in the school improvement process. In most cases, the principal performed this role but in at least one school, a team of teachers took on key leadership responsibilities for the project. Interviewees believed that a strong leader could motivate staff and parents, could help organize aspects of the project thus keeping it on track, and could arrange for provision of resources.

Interviewees reflected on the learning opportunities that they experienced as a result of their participation in the project. Through collaboration and professional development, teachers advanced their pedagogical knowledge in areas such as literacy, and they learned how to work collaboratively with parents. Some teachers noted that working with and involving parents was a good thing for schools. Parents learned about school programs and initiatives, and how they could contribute to their children's education. One participant observed that not involving parents detracted from the learning process. When a relationship is developed between parents, teachers and students, improved communication, student behaviour and effort are the result. One participant pointed to the need for strong parent interest in the school plan but noted that this was difficult, it required more time and more responsibility from parents than they were accustomed to giving.

Another learning theme concerned commitment and continuity. Interviewees maintained that the plan must be a priority item for the school community or else it becomes "just another thing" that schools have to do. The success of the process depends on individual commitment, so effort is needed to gain and to maintain commitment. For some teachers close to retirement, encouraging them to embrace the plan and to consider changing their teaching practices was hard work. Changes in staffing challenged schools to keep individuals committed. Continuity of staff

(especially the principal and any teachers in leadership positions) during the life of the project was key to success.

This theme has emerged in all rounds of data collection and bears comment. Principal turnover is a common occurrence in many schools; some districts even have principal rotation policies that exacerbate what seems to be a major thorn in the side of school improvement efforts created by the more “natural” occurrence of retirements, promotions, sick leaves and the like. So it seems imprudent to engage schools in efforts to improve that depend on a form of organizational stability that is an exception rather than a common rule. Admonitions to enshrine school improvement plans in the garb of school policy, to be taken seriously by successions of school leaders and owned by staffs, seem well worth greater allegiance.

Who Has Been Contributing to SIPP and How?

In most schools, many people in different roles contributed to the school improvement process. However, principals and teachers were most active during this period.

Principals were pivotal to the school improvement process as its main overseer. The principal was instrumental in managing and in focusing attention on the school improvement planning project in most schools. In most cases, this involved keeping the plan on the discussion table at meetings and updating the school community on SIP plans and actions. This also required “buffering” or “boundary management,” by ensuring that the barrage of outside initiatives from the board and the province were properly integrated into school plans so that the directions set by the community were not derailed. In one school, interviewees noted that the principal had to redirect the school’s energy to areas that needed attention. The principal arranged for resources for implementation. He ensured buy-in to the project, for example, by getting board support for teachers’ professional development or by informing new staff about the project and how they would be involved. Sometimes, the principal took direct responsibility for SIP tasks rather than leaving it to others. Principals led by example, coaching and taking on yard or bus duty, for example.

But in some cases, principals did not give the SI plan priority status. In one school, the principal decided to focus on the plan submitted to the board only for the present but the intention was to develop a new school improvement plan incorporating certain criteria in the near future. Similarly, in another school, the new principal decided the plan should be revised so that certain parameters and objectives would be met. A consultation period with teachers was to be organized to address needed changes. In another school with a new principal, interviewees thought the principal was not as enthusiastic about the school improvement planning process as the previous principal had been. This principal felt that being new involved a transition/learning period that slowed the project but this situation would be rectified soon.

Many teachers were involved in implementing school improvement activities and in continued committee work on initiatives, although, this was more in evidence at schools making good progress. In one school, all teachers were involved in some way during the implementation stage. In another school, teachers formed an action team that took management responsibility for reviewing, monitoring and revising the plan. Teachers attended professional development

workshops to help them in their SIP endeavours. One teacher gave a presentation to other schools on how to implement school improvement. Teachers engaged in methods to improve home/school relations such as inviting parents into their classrooms, calling home with good news, communicating with parents via daily agendas and monthly newsletters, offering workshops for parents, and participating in school council meetings.

Parents were involved in a variety of ways during the implementation stage. They participated in at-home activities with their children. They monitored homework completion. They attended school events. They assisted at the school by cooking; by supervising children; by helping teachers with clerical tasks; by organizing, driving to and aiding with field trips; and by assisting in the classroom. Parents contributed to new plans through school council discussions and through a survey, in the case of one school.

School councils varied in their activities and influence during the implementation stage. Some school councils continued to play a role in decision-making about the school improvement plan. These councils reviewed plans, actions, and results, determined objectives and priorities, and communicated outcomes. One council set-up a special sub-committee on the planning project. Other councils were more involved in traditional activities such as fundraising, organizing parent events, organizing volunteers, and communicating with parents about school happenings.

Others involved in the school improvement initiative were mentioned less frequently such as students who were busy with many activities. Some contributions were made by people outside of the immediate school community - the school board, resource teachers, and teacher trainees. The most frequently mentioned outside involvement came from the school board in the form of professional development opportunities.

Factors That Influence Contributions and Implementation

Interviewees cited numerous factors that influenced the contributions that people were able to make to the school improvement project, although some of their answers were broader and touched on factors that helped successful implementation. These factors have been clustered into like categories. Some factors could be viewed as both helping and hindering contributions, such as communication. The most frequently mentioned factors included: attributes of and actions by principals, teachers, school councils and parents; shared responsibility for tasks and ownership of the process; provision of resources; communication; effects of the context in which schools are operating; and time. Two factors mentioned in single cases were the school improvement planning process and the visibility of the project. Factors that seemed to be particularly crucial in schools that made considerable advances in SIPP included: leadership by the principal or teachers (i.e., school action team); active participation in and ownership of the project by parents, and the school community; resources and support particularly from the board; good communication; learning opportunities for teachers; and continuity of staff.

The leadership role played by the principal was considered critical to ensuring effective contribution to the process. On the positive side, the principal ensured that teachers and parents were invited and were able to participate by creating an atmosphere and circumstances that

encouraged involvement. For example, the principal arranged for resources to support the project. Moreover, the principal recognized contributions and showed appreciation for efforts. Some principals had a vision of how the school could be operating and secured buy-in from the school community on working toward that vision. However, in one case, a principal decided to redirect attention from the school improvement plan to the school operational plan.

The style of leadership needed to suit the needs of the school and its community in order to facilitate contributions. In one school that seemed to be doing well on this project, the principal was described as casual, appropriate, accommodating, enthusiastic and optimistic. In another school that did not seem to be advancing as quickly as participants would like, the new principal seemed to be less organized, and less committed to pushing the plan than the previous principal.

Teachers also took leadership responsibility for encouraging contributions. They solicited the participation of other teachers and parents. In one school that had made significant progress, the school action team, comprised of five highly respected teachers who were interested in school improvement, created a good environment for open discussion and held productive meetings. They encouraged cohesion and collaboration with other teachers.

Teachers praised the creation of a learning environment at work. They enjoyed learning a variety of instructional techniques and working together to improve student learning. Positive attitudes and active participation of teachers were motivating elements for parents. Parents could see how hard teachers were working and how they were willing to take on tasks so this motivated them to be involved. When teachers and principals welcomed parents as part of the team, parents became comfortable members of the school community.

Parents' involvement was also facilitated by other means. Some talked about their school councils creating a welcoming atmosphere. School council members were friendly with other parents and would reach out to invite their participation. Council meetings were informative with regular updates on the SIP. However, in some instances, inadequate attendance at meetings hindered the communication process. Training for parents was useful as they learned about how they could work with children and with the schools. In some schools, workshops attracted sizable numbers of parents depending on the topic. Social events that involved parents and their children drew the biggest crowds. Interviewees noted that good communication helped parents become aware of how they could contribute. School personnel appreciated parents who took the time to share responsibility for tasks with them. This motivated the staff to contribute more as well. In one school, it was evident that parents' socioeconomic level was a factor since these well-to-do parents had time to spend on school activities and the capacity to generate funds to help with SIP initiatives. One school used a survey to gather input from parents for their school plan.

Other factors had a negative impact on parent involvement. Some parents did not have the time to participate as they were busy working, or had other responsibilities that hindered their involvement. Schools intimidated some parents, in general. Some had previous negative experience with the school system, or unpleasant memories of their time in school. Some did not feel comfortable with a new role for parents in schools. Others had the wrong idea about what was expected of them. One parent committee did not receive the recognition that they deserved for their ideas and contributions.

Communication was a critical factor affecting levels of engagement. As previously mentioned, communication with parents about how they could specifically contribute was helpful. Also, the development of an effective discussion climate at meetings enabled people to participate effectively. Communication also was important in a broader sense, as it enabled the school community to learn about what had been achieved by the project, thereby, increasing motivation to continue working towards goals. When communication was inadequate, enthusiasm and motivation for SIP dropped off, as people were not aware of what was being accomplished, generally, and individual efforts seemed to be regarded as limited.

The provision of resources for the project enabled people to participate. Teachers appreciated arrangements that allowed time for meeting, such as supply coverage.

Principals were instrumental in arranging for resources. Some school boards were supportive of the project by supplying professional development opportunities that aided teachers' efforts to improve in targeted ways. Parents and school councils who fundraised for SIP initiatives enabled projects to proceed.

Several factors were identified by only one person. One principal said the way in which the school improvement plan was constructed helped the process by providing signposts for monitoring what was being achieved and, thus, it was possible to demonstrate to the community what was happening. One participant noted that the visibility of the project within the school community and the school board increased interest in the process. The project was considered a board priority and the learning from the project was shared with other schools.

Other Ideas about What Schools Could Do to Help Effective Contribution

Interviewees offered a variety of suggestions to promote the participation of stakeholders in school improvement. Many of these suggestions have been mentioned but participants reiterated them with a slightly different emphasis.

The one set of factors that most interviewees stressed was resources and support. More funding on a regular, timely basis would be ideal. However, some schools lamented that they lacked basics (like sufficient textbooks) so adequate funding for the basics as well as funds to pursue school improvement initiatives would be appreciated. Teachers need time built in their schedule for meetings and SIP activities. Supply coverage would allow teachers to get together. Professional development for teachers would enable them to acquire new skills. Participants thought the provision of a facilitator to help with implementation would be extremely useful. Funding influences what directions schools are able to follow.

Communication was considered a critical influence on the successful involvement of participants in SIP. Communications must be timely, ongoing, and appropriate to the audience. There needs to be good communication and collaboration among staff so that they can work together properly. Schools must communicate effectively and supportively with parents. Parents need better information about the specific roles and responsibilities that they can assume. Boards must provide feedback to parents when they solicit their participation in surveys and policy decisions.

Interviewees made suggestions about the school improvement planning process. Most importantly, they stressed, school improvement planning must be considered a priority. Time must be devoted to the plan so that it remains a focus for the school and so other obligations do not sideline it. In fact, interviewees thought that competing initiatives from the board or the province should be decreased. They suggested that a portion of regular meetings or special meetings just for SIP be considered. The scheduling of meetings should take into account both teachers' and parents' availability. In some cases, teams involved during the planning stage did not meet during implementation and interviewees felt this should not be the case. One principal thought the three year time period for the project was too long to continue momentum with the personnel changes that naturally occur in schools and with the many other directives to which schools must attend.

Schools need good leadership. Principals were instrumental in motivating staff and parents to participate. Some principals were able to keep the focus on SIP. Principals generally kept their eye on what was being accomplished by whom. It was thought that principals should remain in place for the duration of the project to ensure continuity. Continuity of teacher leaders and school council leaders was also thought to be an advantage.

The matter of parent involvement revealed differing opinions of participants. Generally, interviewees would like more involvement from more parents. One interviewee remarked that schools need more parent volunteers who are reliable. However, some interviewees raised the question of appropriate involvement. One teacher thought that parents needed a clearer understanding of the boundaries of their roles and responsibilities as well as a more school-wide focus instead of individual child focus. Schools should recognize the contributions of parent committees. Some thought that schools should put more effort into engaging parents and teachers in decision-making roles and on working committees.

Several interviewees thought that schools should do more to network with other schools, particularly with other SIP schools. Information and idea sharing would help schools to learn from each other. Interviewees thought the research report on the project should be available to participants so that they could learn from the experiences in other schools.

Schools should develop ownership and commitment from their community by seeking their input in school plans. With common goals and a vision of future directions, people are more involved in and more supportive of school plans.

Changes in People and Structures

All schools underwent some changes in either structures or people involved in the school improvement effort. However, there was a difference between schools that reported they were pleased with their advancement in SIP and schools that suggested momentum had slowed. In schools making good progress, there was no change in basic structures but there were some staff, parent and community changes. Core leadership remained constant in these schools and parent involvement increased during the life of the project.

In schools reporting only fair or no progress in the second year of implementation, there were changes in structures and people, or there were structures in place but no meetings were

scheduled. The changing of personnel and the lack of meetings had a negative effect on momentum. Changing principals, as much of our earlier data indicate, had a negative impact on the speed at which projects were advancing. At one school, teacher participation in the project went from mandatory, under the previous principal, to voluntary, under the new principal: this resulted in decreased teacher involvement. Parent involvement in most schools either remained constant or decreased in the second year.

Tracking Progress

There were significant differences in tracking efforts among the schools. In schools that reported making good headway on SIP, interviewees were aware of ongoing monitoring, evaluation and revision of plans and activities by the principal (in two schools) or by school action team (in one school). Progress on the project was shared with the school community at meetings where opportunities to discuss and revise initiatives were afforded. The planning document itself was used to record and describe achievements. A variety of data sources were employed to track progress, such as EQAO results, CCAT scores, CTBS scores, and writing and reading exemplars.

In schools running out of steam, there was only some or no monitoring, evaluation and revision of plans and actions. Different interviewees within the same school offered different answers about who was doing what; some people thought that principals or school councils were probably monitoring the plan. In a few of these schools, interviewees said that formal evaluation and revision was planned “for the future”.

What Has Been Successful?

In three schools, significant progress was reported on all goals, e.g. Virtues Program, curriculum nights and family math. In one school, despite many obstacles, gains were reported for two goal areas, i.e. the literacy and behavioural strands. One school had undergone a culture change; they now embraced the school improvement planning process as a necessary part of the culture of the school. Teachers appreciated the release time arranged by the principal. At another school, initial doubts about the project disappeared and complete teacher acceptance of the plan and the project were evident. One school reported improved student achievement. Students were enthusiastic about the many activities that were generated by increased teacher and parent involvement. Parent awareness and involvement were increased as a consequence of SIP initiatives and successes.

Respondents in half of the schools indicated that there was little or no success this year. However, some observed they had achieved a great deal in the previous year so they still had successes to report. Some said there were successes through individual efforts and others noted that there were plans for future initiatives.

What Difficulties Were Experienced?

In schools that had experienced considerable success, interviewees had difficulty identifying problems without probing. For one principal, the biggest difficulty was maintaining momentum over time, particularly as the focus of the plan changed and new initiatives demanded attention. Therefore, it was essential to limit goals so that teachers were not over-burdened. Another principal concurred that it was necessary to limit goals and to have the courage to say no, that some things could not be done. Two teachers noted that SIP is a slow process that requires patience and much time to do the job properly.

In schools that had trouble with their progress, numerous difficulties were identified, the most frequently mentioned being lack of time. Schools have many competing demands to fulfil. Teachers have heavy workloads, and in some schools, they acquired additional responsibilities as a result of amalgamation and contract negotiations. These contextual factors adversely affected teacher morale and their willingness to participate.

In some instances, it was difficult to get parents involved, especially the larger parent population. Parent involvement was impeded by conflict between parent groups; by unsuccessful fundraising efforts; by parents not being available due to other obligations; by lack of recognition for parent committee ideas; and by the nature of school community, which was poor, immigrant, mobile, and not committed to the school. The nature of school can have a negative impact on success. For example, one large school had difficulty organizing for all of its teachers to work together.

Other challenges included: staff changes, especially when this involved the principal; lack of staff commitment and motivation i.e., staff resistance; lack of attention to or not working on SIP during the second year; lack of follow-up, monitoring, and evaluation of the SIP; inadequate communication; and lack of support of the SIP on the part of the board or the provincial government i.e. no facilitator or release time.

Key Factors for Success

Factors that affect the progress and outcomes of school improvement initiatives according to those interviewed included: leadership, communication, ownership/commitment, collaboration, staff attributes, time, resources, parent involvement, contextual concerns and matters related to the school improvement planning process such as monitoring and flexibility. Less frequently cited factors included: visibility of the SIP, support, continuity of staff, and some points to do with the school improvement planning process such as scheduling.

Leadership commonly meant leadership by the principal; however, leadership was also demonstrated by teachers and by school councils. The principal played a strong administrative role in overseeing, organizing and coordinating SIP activities. This entailed establishing SIP as a priority, and minimizing outside distractions, or integrating outside demands so that SIP activities could move forward. The principal obtained resources to fulfil needs. The principal was instrumental in creating a receptive school climate that encouraged participation of teachers and parents. The principal was the tracker, the motivator, the cheerleader and the communicator

in most schools. In a few cases, interviewees mentioned leadership roles performed by teachers or parents. At one school, a team of highly respected teachers led the SIPP, while in other instances, parent or school council leadership was considered helpful.

Ongoing communication using a variety of methods was deemed necessary to keep people informed, interested and motivated. Principals often had a key part in keeping communication flowing at meetings and via written means. Good communication among staff, parents, school councils and students allowed these stakeholders to learn from each other and to improve the learning situation for students. With staff changes, it was critical for the principal to communicate with new staff about SIPP expectations before hiring so that they would be on board when they began work.

Another factor related to the themes of ownership, commitment and collaboration. It was important to get the school community to commit themselves, both initially and over time, to working together on common goals and activities that would benefit students. Principals initially worked to obtain this commitment but with the success of initiatives over time, ownership and commitment grew, and SIP became part of the culture of some schools. It was considered vital to obtain teacher's commitment since much of the implementation depends on teachers as many projects had classroom implications. Ownership and commitment were increased when teachers and parents participated in the development, implementation, and revision of plans. Other factors that contributed to or detracted from commitment included: communication; consistent, ongoing monitoring and reporting; provision of resources (e.g. the facilitator); teacher attitudes; administrative support; continuity of staff; and time for teachers to meet, plan, and report.

Interviewees stressed that staff attributes affected the school improvement process. Some teachers, who had a positive impact on SIPP, were described as cohesive, professional, willing, diligent, and hardworking. They took initiative for activities and displayed positive attitudes. On the other hand, some teachers were feeling frustrated and overworked, with the many competing demands for their attention, so SIPP was seen as an added stress. Moreover, if the plan was not considered a priority by the principal or school community, then it became just one more thing for teachers to do, so this seriously hindered implementation.

Time and resources were other factors that were key to success. Schools are not naturally organized for staff collaboration so it was hard to schedule these interludes. Teachers found release time to be beneficial as this afforded them the opportunity to meet during the day when they would not be as tired. Some suggested that regular release time would facilitate SIPP efforts. As time was scarce for both teachers and parents, it was necessary to find creative ways of maximizing the ability of participants to devote their available time to the project. Principals often aided with creative scheduling that worked for all. Adequate resources are needed to undergo a school improvement process. Participants perceived that funding was inadequate and not delivered on a timely basis. The provision of a facilitator was considered very helpful as this generated interest in the project and as this enabled the planning process to proceed effectively. Interviewees were concerned about getting proper support for the project from administration, the board and the province. One potential area for support would be allowing for some continuity of staffing at schools undergoing this kind of project, especially leaving the principal in place for

its duration. One current example was a board which used a project school as a learning model for other schools, thus the “visibility” of the project helped build support and momentum within the school, and develop understanding of the process for colleagues outside of the school.

Parent involvement was another common factor mentioned by interviewees. In one school, they talked about having a core group of parents who were willing to work for the good of the school and its students, while setting aside their own interests. Some suggested involving as many parents as possible in the SIP to gain ownership and commitment, and to gain understanding of what happens at school. Others thought it was important to clearly define and communicate the role of parents and the school councils in education, generally, and in decision-making around the SIP. In several instances, school councils and parents were actively involved in decision-making but, in most cases, they were informed rather than involved during the implementation stage.

Interviewees mentioned items related to the school improvement planning process that affected the progress and outcomes of the project. Most frequently noted was the necessity of ongoing monitoring, evaluation and revision of the plan to keep it relevant and to illustrate to stakeholders that progress was being made. Plans needed to be flexible and to be modified to accommodate changes in circumstances. Schools must focus on the plan as a priority, while ensuring that it properly addresses important issues within its vision, yet remain realistic in scope. This was not always the case in every school. One principal noted that SIP is a sensible program, therefore, it appeals to people. Another interviewee suggested that celebrating successes and giving positive reinforcement motivated the school community to work together on the project.

Other Comments or Insights

Several interviewees stressed that the project was worth doing, despite the extra work. They felt that all schools should be doing this kind of planning for continual improvement. There were many benefits to having a plan including: common goals; increased commitment and involvement; evolution of parents’ understanding about what and how their children were learning. In addition, students seemed happy that their parents were involved and they tried harder. School councils had a focus for their activity and this helped them to participate constructively and cohesively.

However, changes in the way that schools are organized may have to be instituted to enable stakeholders to effectively participate in these processes. Most importantly, teachers and parents need the time and the opportunity to meet together and to work on SIPP activities. Parents need to be welcomed and encouraged to engage in decision-making processes. Partners in SIP efforts increase trust in each other as they work together. Thus, they communicate more openly, and they are able to develop strategies and ideas more effectively. Continuity of staff would also help to keep the project progressing well. Staff changes, especially when this entailed the principal, had a dampening effect on momentum.

Another theme that emerged in response to this question related to learning. One teacher said the school improvement process as a way of keeping the job professional as teachers

demonstrated accountability by always reflecting on how to improve their practice. Teachers were learners, not just teachers. Another teacher thought of SIP activities as job embedded professional development and, as such, felt that teachers should be able to get credit for this work in relation to their Professional Learning Programs. One parent who had been active in SIP experienced personal growth and achievement. She was encouraged to apply for and to attend teacher's college. Other interviewees would like to see more networking among the schools involved in the SIPP so that they can learn from each other. Interviewees requested that the results of the research project be shared with participants.

Conclusion

Progress during the second full year of SIP implementation became much less evident as compared with the first year. This was partly due to such unpredictable but not uncommon issues as a potential school closure (this became a reality in the third year of the project), loss of key people from the school and labour disruption arising from contract negotiations. Clearly, getting SIP processes started is much less difficult than sustaining them even just over several years. And much of what knocks them off track lies largely beyond the capacity of the school to control. In the minority of schools able to sustain their momentum, what most accounts for their success includes:

- “strong” leadership, usually from the principal, but sometimes from a team;
- close monitoring of progress and a willingness to adapt in response to new information;
- professional development opportunities both inside and outside of the school aligned to the demands of the SIP;
- effective communication within the school and between the school and parents about SIP and its progress;
- active participation by parents in most aspects of SIP and its implementation;
- time for SIP participants to collaborate.

6. Looking for Impact: Final Round of Data Collection

Introduction

The fourth and final round of data reported in this chapter summarizes the impact of SIP and describes the third year of SIP implementation. The chapter also highlights lessons learned over the three year period of this project about the school improvement planning process, in general, and about parent participation in the process, in particular.

Of the ten schools originally agreeing to participate in the study, seven remained by this fourth round of data collection: one school did not participate in any interviews and one school engaged in two sets of interviews but was then closed due to Board restructuring. The final set of interviews in the third school could not be arranged for logistical reasons (but EQAO data from this school are included in our analysis). Interviews were conducted between December 2002 and March 2003, depending on the availability of interviewees at each school.

This chapter reports grade 3 and 6 student achievement in the case schools using evidence collected by Ontario's Educational Quality and Accountability Office about reading, writing and mathematics. All other evidence was obtained through interviews with administrative staff, teachers, and parents, some of whom were directly involved in the SIP and some who were not. The total number of interviews conducted in each school ranged from 4 - 6.

The Impact of School Improvement Planning After Three Years

Claims about the impact of SIP in this section are of two types. In the case of student achievement, claims are about changes that occurred in the case schools over the three years of the study. While these changes may have been caused in some measure by SIP, we have no way of knowing if that is so. In the case of claims about many other types of impact, we rely on the opinion of those most closely involved in SIP activities. Such evidence has both strengths and weaknesses. Those most directly involved in SIP are in a good position to observe the consequences of their activity. Indeed they may be the only available source of evidence about some of these consequences. On the other hand, these people also are likely to have a significant stake in the success of their work and may, knowingly or otherwise, overestimate the positive effects of that work. As with most causal claims, a generous amount of caution is in order on the readers' part.

Three of the seven schools were perceived to have had many accomplishments and continued to steadily meet their goals over the three years. In the other schools, respondents reported achievements primarily in the first year with progress slowing down or stalling thereafter. However, respondents in all schools believed that something important had been accomplished even if they did not regard the project as a total success in the long run.

The types of changes evident in our data are related to achievement in reading, writing and mathematics, as well as other student outcomes. Changes were also reported in parent participation, literacy assessment techniques, resources, and school climate.

Student achievement. In all eight schools, improving achievement in one or more of reading, writing and math was among the goals for school improvement. For this reason, actual gains in students' achievement, as measured by EQAO grade 3 and 6 tests, provide independent confirmation or disconfirmation of the dominant impression of SIP in the case schools.

Table 6.1 summarizes EQAO scores in years 2000-01, 2001-02, as well as changes that occurred between those years; these scores are the percentage of students achieving levels 3 and 4 on the tests. Threats to the stability and reliability of such changes over only two years justify caution in interpreting such results and we will report results for 2003 as soon as they are available.

The two sets of annual achievement scores indicate especially high levels of performance in grade 3 for school 1 (mean grade 3 scores of 93.0 and 89.7) and lower, but still the highest scores among all schools, in grade 6 (mean grade scores of 71.0 and 73.3). Scores for schools 2 and 8 were very similar in the first year reported in both grades 3 and 6. School 2 scores increased in the second year in both grades, as did grade 6 scores in school 8; but school 8's grade 3 scores dropped significantly in the second year.

Across the schools as a whole, of the eight schools, four (2, 4, 6 and 7) showed mean gains in grade 3 scores; these gains were relatively large for schools 2 (11.3) and especially 4 (23.3). For the grade 6 scores, three (1, 3, 6 and 8) of the seven schools for which data were available showed mean gains, the largest for schools 3 (17.7) and 6 (12.3).

Data collected from administrators, parents and teachers led us to characterize schools 1, 2 and 3 as relatively successful; respondents had uniformly positive views about the progress made in these schools as a consequence of their school improvement efforts. But the achievement data reported in Table 6.1 do not strongly endorse these views. School 1 scores actually declined over the two-year period, not too surprising given their high levels of initial performance. School 2 made an impressive gain at the grade 3 level but actually lost a bit of ground (an insignificant amount) at the grade 6 level. School 3, beginning with fairly low scores in the first year, lost ground in grade 3 but made large gains in grade 6.

So the schools viewed as most successful by those who lived in them either were successful to begin with and not much changed (school 1) or had mixture of gains and losses (schools 2 and 3). Although opinions of staff and parents about progress from SIP were more circumspect in schools 4 and 6, the pattern of change in scores was at least as impressive in these schools as in schools 2 and 3 and more impressive than in school 1. (with acknowledgements of a possible ceiling effect at least in grade 3).

While we have spent some time unpacking these results, we do not want to make too much of them. As we indicated at the outset, the reliability of EQAO scores at the school level is unknown and changes in such scores over only a two year period are weak indicators, at best, of trends in a school's trajectory. But the attention devoted to EQAO data in the province demanded that such results be reported in some detail. The absence of such a report would have seriously

undermined the credibility of our study, even though it is the suitability of EQAO data for purposes of estimating changes in individual schools' performances that is the most serious issue requiring attention. Respondents pointed to SIP activities that seem likely to account for literacy achievement gains. Two schools had major improvements to their library. Some schools connected literacy goals in their plan to other outside literacy initiatives to enhance their programs. Schools had a heavier emphasis on reading. Parents had an expanded role in literacy programs; some parents, for example, provided one-on-one help to poor primary readers.

Table 6.1

EQAO Results for Case Study Schools

2000-2001 Percentage of Students at Levels 3 and 4								
Grade 3					Grade 6			
<i>Case</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Gr. 3 Mean</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Gr. 6 Mean</i>
1	94	87	98	93.0	75	70	68	71
2	52	36	68	52.0	49	40	69	52.7
3	18	44	41	34.3	37	47	27	37.0
4	33	38	38	36.3	71	71	67	69.7
5	47	40	54	47.0	39	39	39	39.0
6	29	43	29	33.7	28	33	39	33.3
7	30	49	13	30.7				
8	42	51	69	54.0	49	41	63	51.0
Province	49	52	61	54.0	55	53	54	54.0
2001-2002 Percentage of Students at Levels 3 and 4								
Grade 3					Grade 6			
<i>Case</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Gr. 3 Mean</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Gr. 6 Mean</i>
1	89	87	93	89.7	81	79	60	73.3
2	61	50	79	63.3	45	45	64	51.3
3	19	42	27	29.3	62	52	50	54.7
4	59	56	64	59.7	66	62	50	59.3
5	30	36	34	33.3	38	43	25	35.3
6	37	49	28	38.0	48	41	48	45.7
7	41	47	20	36.0				
8	33	45	39	39.0	51	51	59	53.7
Province	50	55	58	54.3	55	53	54	54.0

Table 6.1 (Continued)

EQAO Results for Case Study Schools

Achievement Gains Over Two Years (2001 to 2002)								
Grade 3					Grade 6			
<i>Case</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Gr. 3 Mean</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Gr. 6 Mean</i>
1	-5.0	.0	-5.0	-3.3	6.0	9.0	-8.0	2.3
2	9.0	14.0	11.0	11.3	-4.0	5.0	-5.0	-1.3
3	1.0	-2.0	-14.0	-5.0	25.0	5.0	23.0	17.7
4	26.0	18.0	26.0	23.3	-5.0	-9.0	-17.0	-10.3
5	-17.0	-4.0	-20.0	-13.7	-1.0	4.0	-14.0	-3.7
6	8.0	6.0	-1.0	4.3	20.0	8.0	9.0	12.3
7	11.0	-2.0	7.0	5.3				
8	-9.0	-6.0	-30.0	-15.0	2.0	10.0	-4.0	2.7
Province	1.0	6.0	-3.0	.0	.0		.0	.0
Note: No data available for on school.								

Other student outcomes. In addition to EQAO scores, respondents in some schools reported increased academic results on report cards. Student behaviour and attitudes were believed to have been positively affected by SIP in many schools. In one school, interviewees remarked that the students were happier and were responding better because of increased parent involvement. In another school, the increased variety of student learning experiences was appreciated.

Increased parent involvement. All schools reported that parent involvement had improved. In some cases, this meant that there were more parents involved in a wider range of activities at the school and in their children's education. We report our data about parent involvement in some detail in a separate section later in this chapter.

New and better assessment techniques. Assessment procedures were strengthened with more assessment being undertaken, as well as an increased variety of assessment tools being introduced. Progress on reading was tracked more closely. Indicators were developed to help measure progress.

Increased resources. Interviewees described the increased resources devoted to the SIP. Professional development allowed both teachers and parents to learn new skills. Teachers found that release time for meetings facilitated better coordination between Divisions. Parents volunteering for the school added extra human resources and enabled a variety of activities to be conducted.

A facilitative school climate. A school climate and culture that fosters learning, openness to change, communication, cooperation and teamwork developed in some schools, according to interviewees. This was particularly true of the three "successful" schools. At these schools, plans became integrated into school routines and there was common purpose and investment in the schools by all stakeholders. There was a clearer appreciation of goals, in the three schools, and a

focus on working towards them. And there was better communication between parents, teachers and administrators using a variety of verbal and written techniques.

Key Factors in the Successful Implementation of School Improvement

Interviewees from all schools identified similar factors accounting for success or lack of progress, depending on their nature, including: the school improvement planning process itself; principal leadership; teacher leadership; time for participation, school climate; communication; resources; and parent involvement.

The planning process. About SIP content and processes, interviewees indicated that success depended on the content of the plan being manageable in scope (not too many goals), data driven - but based on what the school community identifies as important. The SIP process should be inclusive, comprehensive and based on the notion of ongoing or continuous improvement. Schools, according to respondents, should use an individualized approach to school improvement looking at their own school needs.

Several interviewees recommended using the Educational Improvement Commission format (a product of the development work that preceded this study); it was believed to have worked well as a tool for organization. A common vision should be developed, according to interviewees, one that fosters broad ownership and involvement. Goals should also emerge from data collected about the status of the school and its effectiveness. Baseline data collection was recommended, followed by regular monitoring which then allows participants to see if goals are being met.

At “successful” schools, plans were continually monitored and modified by school teams whereas in schools with mixed results, follow-up was considered a problem.

Principal leadership. The leadership of the principal emerged as a key factor in all schools. In “successful” schools, the principal acted as a catalyst and as a motivator for the project. These principals believed in the plan, kept it on the front burner, brought staff and parents into SIP, empowered staff and parents by encouraging ownership of the plan by all; and they continually communicated about SIP. These principals ensured that the planning process was integrated into school routines and that teachers and, in one case, a parent took leadership in key projects. Principals significantly contributed to the creation of a school climate and culture that embraces improvement.

Changing principals was considered to have a negative affect on SIP implementation. New principals often were not as committed to existing plans that they had not been part of creating; these principals abandoned plans or gave them little attention. Without school improvement or action teams in place to emphasize SIP implementation and monitoring, new initiatives were introduced by the principal and everyday demands and routines replaced SIP. In one “successful” school, the departing principal left an empowered team to continue the process so that principal continuity was not an issue.

Teacher leadership. Respondents also viewed the leadership of teachers – acting in teams, as well as individually - as vitally important if SIP initiatives were to be integrated into everyday

school life. Sustained teacher leadership was evident in all three “successful” schools. Teachers played an active role in school improvement teams that remained in place for the life of the project. At one school, an experienced team of teachers who understood and valued learning helped other teachers make sense of the plan and modify it so that it was workable. At another school, teacher leaders were instrumental in ensuring that SIP continued even when the principal and other staff left the school. At another school, the teachers supported SIP and were actively involved at all stages. At mixed success schools, teacher leadership was more evident in the beginning of the project but diminished during the later stages of the work.

Time for participation. Interviewees cautioned that patience is necessary when adopting SIP, particularly at the beginning. Problem solving is fruitful but time consuming. Time is also needed to implement strategies. Scheduling of meetings to suit all participants is important. Short term projects with finite objectives enables many people to be involved and allows results to be seen quickly; this increases motivation and enthusiasm.

Participation of all stakeholders allows for high quality data input and for ownership to develop. According to respondents, such ownership develops from having input into the plan and by participation in its implementation. Everyone needs to be committed to the process. At one “successful” school, it was considered important to have everyone involved in all school improvement stages; staff, parents and students had key roles to play. Interviewees used the image of a chain in which everyone was linked to describe people’s relationship with each other in SIP. Teambuilding was both a means and an end in this school. In other schools, all stakeholders were heavily involved in establishing plans at the beginning of the project but participation patterns changed as the project evolved so that teachers and administrators gradually assumed a much greater role than parents.

School climate. An improvement-oriented school climate and culture was an important factor leading to successful SIP implementation. In such a climate, staff were open to change and “bought into” the planning process. According to respondents, an improvement-oriented climate included staff who were enthusiastic, dedicated and energetic. They were team players who valued and respected diverse views. Through team effort and excellent communication, trust develops. Group cohesion is promoted; the school community works together on mutual goals.

Communication. This factor was frequently mentioned as a key to successful SIP. Excellent communication fostered trust and understanding. In meetings, it was important to create an environment that encouraged discussion and allowed for consensus to be developed. All views needed to be treated with respect.

Communication to the community was important to keep people informed about the progress being made on plans and to encourage involvement in project initiatives. Principals, teachers, school councils and parents were instrumental in communicating with the community using a variety of methods.

Resources. Support and resources were identified as important by many interviewees. At one successful school, the strong support received from their board, superintendent and trustees was mentioned. Release time allowed staff at numerous schools to met and focus on SIP.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement was identified as a key factor contributing to the success of SIP; we explore the role of parents more fully than the other key factors here because it is the explicit focus of our study.

Extent of parent influence. In the early stages of SIP, parents in all schools had some influence on decisions regarding initial plans. In “successful” schools, parents continued to exert influence, while in mixed success schools, parental influence dwindled in year two and three. In “successful” schools, parents were very influential on committees and were on an equal plane with teachers and administrators. Yet, at two of the schools, it appeared that the principal and teachers did more of the decision-making once implementation began and that the parents were mainly in a support role. Parents still had input but staff tried to ensure that ideas were workable.

In five of the schools, interviewees claimed that parent involvement in SIP had a positive impact. This was especially true at “successful” schools. However, a few interviewees at mixed success schools were not sure about the amount of impact. In two of the schools, parent involvement in SIP had minimal impact. Interviewees described the many positive impacts, including: increased parental understanding of school and educational matters; increased cooperation and communication between home and school; increased parental involvement; better student attitudes, behaviour, learning and achievement; more support for student learning; more parents feeling a sense of ownership in the school; more opportunities for parental learning and education; and better plans because of parental input.

Forms of parent involvement. All schools experienced helpful forms of parent involvement including: parental input into plans, volunteering in the classroom, instructional activity with children, volunteering for events or schools trips, attending school activities, communication between parents and teachers, increased parent understanding through participation, parent education and decision making. At one successful school, interviewees maintained that all parent involvement was helpful. Some felt that everything parents did for the school was beneficial no matter how small a contribution an individual was able to make. However, having parents as part of the team was considered to be the most important form of involvement as they played a significant role in drafting the plan. Parents continued to make a huge contribution to implementation because they organized events and volunteered so that staff did not burn out.

Parent input, respondents believed, added a valuable perspective to the planning process. Such input was obtained in many ways - surveys, interviews and discussions in meetings. School councils were helpful in bringing forward parents’ views. Parents on committees had good ideas and enjoyed brainstorming with teachers on ways to improve schools. Participation in planning gave parents a new perspective on their role; they saw themselves as partners with school staff. They felt valued and respected on committees and their involvement in SIP gave credibility to the plan. Parent feedback about changes also helped to evaluate the project.

Parents contributed human resources to many implementation activities. One-on-one work with pupils on reading, math or craft activities was valuable. Parents worked on specific tasks such as helping on class trips and preparing special lunches. They took the lead in organizing

some programs and events. Some schools organized volunteers by surveying parents about ways in which they could contribute or by personally asking them to help in certain activities.

Interviewees also identified a number of ways in which parental involvement was not helpful: “hovering” by overprotective parents in the school without applying themselves to tasks; parents who had a single item agenda and who fixated on it; parents who were unreliable and dropped out of activities; and parents who were only there for their own children.

Strategies for involving parents. Respondents identified many ways to foster greater parent participation: an invitational approach by the principal, school staff, and school council; good communication; special events; activities that benefit parents’ own children; having parent involvement as a goal in the school plan; and recognition of parents’ contributions. In all schools, the principal was a key person in creating a climate that welcomes parents. The principal set the stage and modeled welcoming behaviour. Staff had to be prepared to share power with parents, to listen, and to act on their advice. Teachers who realized they needed parents and welcomed them in a positive manner contributed to parent involvement in important ways. Parent leaders needed to be positive about SIP and to invite other parents to participate. School councils were instrumental in drawing in parents.

Good communication was a valuable tool for involving parents. Newsletters and information sent home allowed a wide number of parents to be informed about what was happening with SIP. Communication strategies, of whatever sort, should be formulated to encourage parent feedback. Committee work which involved parents allowed dialogue between parents and staff and for trust to be developed. Parents responded better to personal invitations than to general calls for participation.

Special events and activities drew parents to the school. These activities were considered beneficial to the children and were non-threatening for parents. Getting parents to the school was considered an initial step in increasing their involvement in other ways.

Schools that had parent involvement as a goal in their plan were generally successful in accomplishing the goal. Parents, in the main, preferred to support school efforts rather than take the lead on such efforts. Short-term projects with clear expectations and time limits appeared to appeal to parents most.

The manner in which parents were treated once they were involved affected their participation. Parents’ responsibilities and other commitments need to be accommodated. Schools, respondents stressed, can only expect what parents are willing to give in terms of time and input. Parent schedules were considered. Parents needed to feel comfortable, respected and needed; they wanted to feel that they were making a difference. Recognition of parental contributions was appreciated and added to their motivation to be involved.

In the three “successful” schools, parents involved in SIP largely mirrored the range of backgrounds of the families in the schools as a whole, although a disproportionate number of highly educated parents were involved in two of these schools. At the mixed success schools, the parents who participated in decision making were mainly middle class, well educated and spoke the schools’ working language. They seemed comfortable being involved on teams and appeared

interested in educational matters. They were actively involved in their children's education. They had high expectations for their children and worked towards realizing educational goals.

Parents involved in other (non-SIP) school activities, such as fundraising, had more diverse backgrounds and were more representative of the background of their school communities. Parents with less formal education, for example, were more likely to become involved in school activities such as attending events or fundraising. Some parents, according to respondents, did not have a good experience with their own schooling and seemed afraid of school. Others were unsure about their role and were wary about interfering with the teacher's job. Others were not available to volunteer as they had to work or they had problems with transportation. Ability to speak the language of instruction in the school was a factor in the nature of parents' participation.

Interviewees suggested that having special resources to encourage parent involvement, especially when language and culture are barriers, is useful. The kinds of resources that would be helpful included: using translators, having guest speakers in another language, having bilingual staff, and having social services in the school. In one highly diverse school, the school became an important way of integrating children and families into Canadian society by providing links with food banks, dental clinics, hospitals and social assistance.

Conclusion

This chapter reported a range of "impacts" of the school improvement process. Most of these impacts are suitably determined through the data provided by our three types of interviewees. Clearly, the weight of opinion from these people was that SIP was helpful and that parent participation both contributed to SIP progress and was, as well, a useful outcome of the process with its own rewards.

The chapter also reported two years of grade 3 and 6 EQAO student achievement results in eight of the case schools, along with gains across those two years. We have been careful to caution our readers not to make too much of these data. Should the results, however, be confirmed by additional data, they would call into question the extent to which real gains in student learning are produced by school improvement processes which most of those involved consider to have been quite positive.

We know that it is extremely difficult to produce significant, lasting gains in student achievement. For example, many of the highly developed and massively funded U.S. Comprehensive School Reform models (see Table 2.1 in the literature review for a description of these models) have produced questionable results at best. In comparison with these models and the efforts undertaken to implement them (including extensive staff development programs), the interventions undertaken in the case schools seem modest indeed. Such contrasts in effort and resources would make consistently impressive gains in student achievement in the case schools seem highly implausible even if we did find them.

C. Testing a Model of Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning

7. A Framework for Successful Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning

Introduction

Results of prior research (Chapter 2) and evidence from the four rounds of data collection over two and one half years (Chapters 3 to 6) in case study schools provided a rich body of evidence from which to construct a framework or model of school improvement processes, including the participation of parents. Framework construction entailed, first, identifying the “factors” which our qualitative data indicated were especially prominent in our case study schools (see especially chapter 6).

We assumed that our case study schools provided us with a quite incomplete picture of school improvement processes and parent roles in those processes, however. So evidence from the cases was examined against the evidence from our literature review. For the most part, all of the factors which emerged as important in our case study data were included in our framework with additional factors added, those repeatedly identified in prior empirical research but not evident in our case study data.

Framework

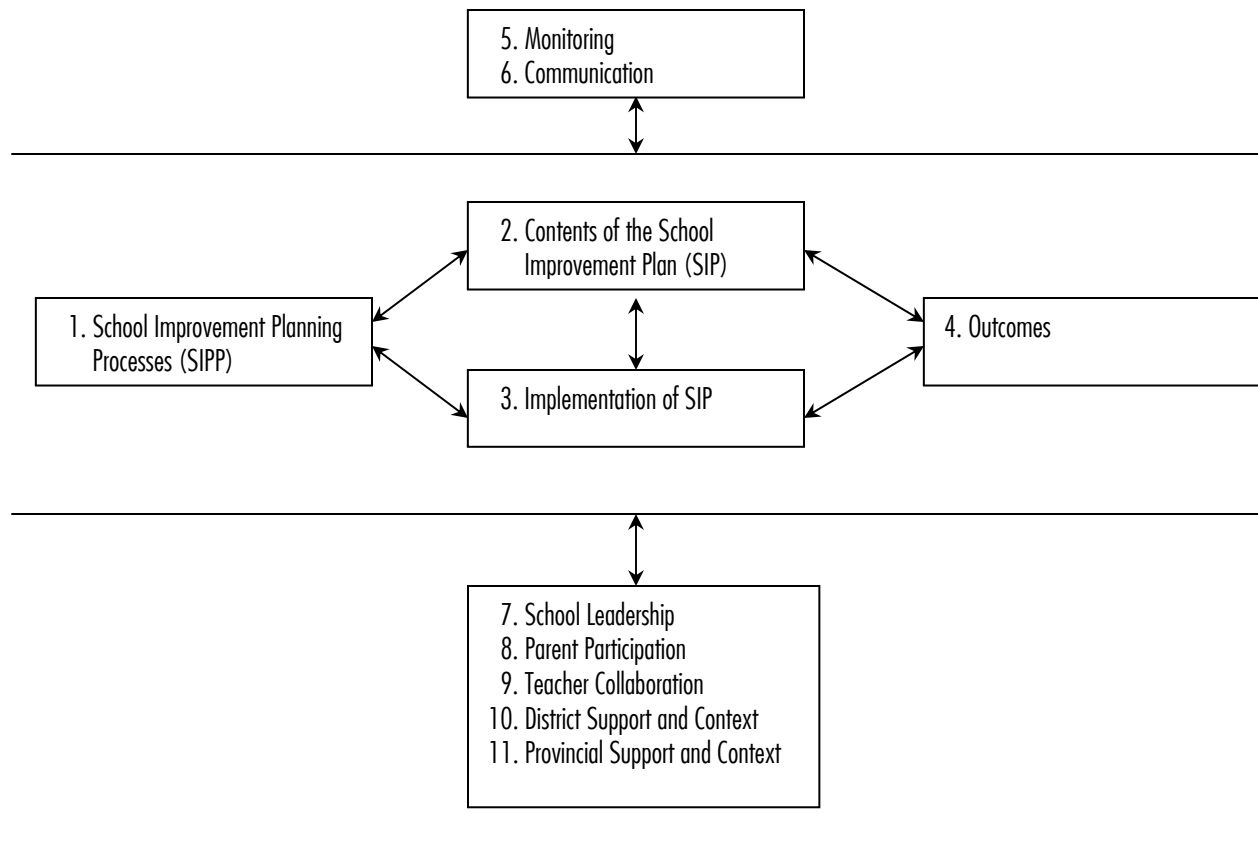
Figure 7.1 is an overview of the framework resulting from our two sources of data about school improvement processes (case studies and literature review); it consists of a set of factors or variables and a general indication of how they are related to one another. Variables 1 to 4, the core variables, are temporally related. A set of processes (variable 1) initiates planning and results usually in a written plan with contents unique to the school and the processes that it has used (variable 2). The plan has goals to be achieved and they have an intended influence on the eventual outcomes of the process (variable 4). But activities undertaken to accomplish those goals – or implement the plan – (variable 3) produce other unplanned outcomes, as well.

At the top of Figure 7.1 are two variables which our data suggest are critical determinants of the trajectory of the SIP processes, as well as the outcomes. These variables, monitoring (variable 5) and communication (variable 6) may be carried out in a variety of ways and more or less well but are not necessarily the responsibility of any single person or group.

At the bottom of Figure 7.1 are five additional variables each consisting of a set of tasks undertaken by those in specific roles or positions. Interactions among these variables occur within the processes signified by variables 1 and 3, school improvement planning and implementation processes.

Figure 7.1

A Framework for Understanding Differences across Schools in the Outcomes of School Improvement Planning Processes Involving Parents



Transforming Evidence into Questions for Data Collection

Moving from the two sources of evidence used to build our framework to a set of questions for data collection entailed making very concrete - in survey item form - what features of each variable in the framework help explain successful school improvement processes. This required us to “drill down” into our case study data and the literature to a level of specificity beyond what has been described to this point. We did this as a way of constructing a multi-item scale to measure each variable in the framework and to examine the relationships among those variables.

Figure 7.2 summarizes the specific conditions associated with each variable in the framework that our two sources of evidence suggest needed to be measured. The far left column in Figure 7.2 identifies the items developed to measure each of these conditions. The items created to measure each variable assume a specific stem which reads approximately “To what

extent do you agree that the [name of variable]”. The “valence” of some items was reversed (worded negatively rather than positively) in the survey instruments.

Figure 7.2

Key Findings from our Research

Key Findings from Case Studies	Previous Research	Relationship to Survey Questions
<i>School Improvement Planning Process</i>		
Involving all stakeholders in the plan’s development contributes to completeness of the plan’s content, to a common vision of future directions, to ownership of the plan by all, and to more successful implementation.	Flinspach & Ryna, 1992 Glover et al, 1996	3, 4
SIP is an ongoing process that requires updating and revision of plans.	MacGilchrist & Mortimore, 1997 Flinspach & Ryan, 1992	2
SIP must be recognized as a priority by the school community.	O’Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996 Sackney et al, 1998	1, 28, 40
<i>The Content of School Improvement Plans</i>		
Content should address student learning, local needs and priorities, but also be driven by data.	Harris & Young, 2000 Glickman, 1993	5, 6
Content should be clear and focused. Limit plans to a manageable number of specific goals and initiatives with realistic timelines and indicators of success.	Stoll & Fink, 1996 Broadhead, et al, 1998	7
Selecting parent involvement as a goal increases parent participation which leads to improved student outcomes. Involvement in student learning activities has the most direct effect on achievement.	Henderson & Berla, 1994 Sanders & Epstein, 1998	8
<i>School Improvement Implementation Process</i>		
Adequate time is needed for SIP. Consider when the best time would be to start the process as it is time consuming. Consider all stakeholders’ schedules in arranging meetings.	Griffith, 2001 Wilson & McPake, 1998	10,11
A school culture that embraces ongoing improvement must be created. Opportunities for staff development and collaboration are crucial. Recognition of hard work and results is motivating.	Eastwood & Tallerico, 1990 Stoll & Fink, 1996	63,64,65,66

The organization learns from new ideas, different view and problem solving.	Sitkin, 1992 Watkins & Marsick, 1993	9
<i>School Improvement Monitoring</i>		
Monitoring of plans and actions allows participants to evaluate progress and to see if alternatives should be explored. Seeing positive results increases motivation and effort. A variety of reliable data sources should be employed in the monitoring and evaluating process. In successful schools, monitoring was undertaken by school leadership teams.	Shields, 1995 Teddle & Reynolds, 2000	13, 14, 15, 16, 17
<i>Communication and School Improvement</i>		
Everyone in the school community needs to be kept informed about plans and results. Communication must be continual and varied in methodology.	Dellar, 1994 Leithwood, Aitken & Jantzi, 2000	17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 30, 42
In meetings, the creation of a comfortable discussion climate fosters open communication, and builds understanding & trust.	Bauer & Bogotch, 2001	21, 24
<i>School Leadership</i>		
School leadership or improvement teams are key in successfully instituting SIP. When teachers, parents and administrators work together as a team, school improvement results. Principals must enable these teams to carry out their responsibilities by providing resources and support, and by empowering teams. Principal continuity, in the long run, is less important when empowered, active SIP teams are in place.	Broadhead, et al, 1998 Harris & Young, 2000	33, 34, 35
The principal is instrumental in initiating SIP, in promoting awareness of and participation in SIP, in ensuring its continuation as a priority. Principals who act as facilitative leaders encourage successful implementation of SIP.	Reeves, 2000 Wilson & Pake, 1998	26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36
Teachers must be energetic and enthusiastic about SIP as they shoulder much of the responsibility for planning and implementation. Teachers are in the majority on most school improvement teams. They are very influential in the SIP process.	Earl & Lee, 1998 O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996	37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47
<i>Parent Participation</i>		
Principals, teachers and parents on schools councils or school improvement teams are instrumental in encouraging parent	Griffith, 2001 Hoover-Dempsey, 1997	23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 41, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104

participation. Personal invitations are better than general requests for involvement. Parents participate in activities if they are willing and able to help, if it affects their children, and if they feel their input is welcome and needed. Recognition is important.		
Parents and school councils contribute ideas and support in the planning stage (i.e., parents gave advice through surveys, interviews, meetings of the school council and school improvement teams while school councils helped to initiate parent participation in SIP and approved plans). Parent input adds vital information to plans. Council approval of directions builds ownership of and commitment to actions. Parents exert much influence in the planning stage.	Hatton, 2001 Stoll & Fink, 1996	48, 49, 50
Parents and school councils mainly provide support in the implementation stage, although a few parents were decision makers on school improvement teams and in charge of select implementation activities. Parents lighten teachers' workload when they help with implementation; thereby avoiding teacher burnout. However, parent influence diminishes at the implementation stage.	MacGilchrist & Mortimore, 1997 Flinspach & Ryan, 1992	48, 50, 51
In the main for SIP purposes, school councils are vehicles for gathering and disseminating information, and for approval of plans/actions rather than decision-making bodies. School improvement teams have more influence in SIP than school councils.	Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999	48, 49, 50, 51
<i>Teacher Collaboration</i>		
Organizational structures and processes need to be established that support teacher collaboration and organizational learning.	Earl & Lee, 2000 Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1995	63, 64, 65, 66
<i>District & Provincial Support and Context</i>		
External support is necessary, especially in the adoption/planning stages of SIP (i.e., a facilitator, staff development, extra resources for release time and for SIP initiatives). Ongoing support would be welcomed in schools who successfully implement SIP, but it is crucial for those schools who are struggling with the process.	Giles, 1998 McBee & Fink, 1989	67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74

<i>Outcomes</i>		
School personnel experience an increased workload as a result of SIP. However, most view SIP as worth the effort because of positive outcomes such as: personal development, enhanced school culture with school-wide, team-based improvement approaches, increased parent involvement and improved student outcomes.	Dellar, 1995 McInerney & Leach, 1992	75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85
Schools with strong school improvement teams who remained proactive throughout the SIP process were successful.	Glover, et al, 1996 MacGilchrist & Mortimore, 1997	13, 14
Learning assessment procedures and practices were strengthened.	Earl & Lee, 1998	80
Student outcomes improve with SIP. Improvements in student attitudes, behaviour, learning and achievement occur in schools who successfully implement SIP. Some improvements are evident at schools who have partial success in implementing SIP.	McInerney & Leach, 1992 Reeves, 2000	86, 87, 88
Increased interaction and communication between home and school results in better home/school relations. This increases parent involvement.	Bauch & Goldring, 1995 Haynes, Comer & Hamilton-Lee, 1989	89, 91, 92, 93, 94
Parents become more involved in their children's education at home and at school. Initially, parents who are newer to schools, who are less familiar with the working language of schools, and who are less educated are drawn to social activities. Then, schools can build on this involvement to invite parents into other school-related activities. More parents become engaged in student learning initiatives. Parents who have experience with schools and who are better educated become involved in school councils, SIP teams, and decision-making roles.	Hatton, 2001 Sanders & Epstein, 1998	52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 62, 93, 94
Parents become more educated about their role in education through SIP. They become more knowledgeable about educational matters and the school system.	Hatton, 2001 Saunders & Epstein, 1998	62, 90, 92

Conclusion

From the list of items described above, three overlapping survey instruments were created, one for each of parents, teachers and administrators. These instruments are described in more detail in the next chapter.

8. An Empirical Test of the Framework, Summary and Recommendations

The variables and relationships included in our framework were tested using survey evidence collected from parents, teachers and school administrators in seven Ontario School districts. In this part of our study, achievement levels and gains scores on EQAO measures of student achievement also were included among the dependent variables. At the time of report writing, only two years of data were available. So the gain score used cannot be considered stable enough to draw firm conclusions. A third year of such data will be available soon and our analyses will be done using gain scores over three years, a more stable measure.

This chapter describes the methods used to collect and analyze the survey data, and reports the results of this analysis. Drawing on all sources of evidence collected during the study, the chapter also provides answers to the questions guiding the project, as a whole, and offers a series of eight recommendations for policy makers, district and school practitioners, and parents.

Research Methods

Sample

The population for the quantitative study was the 362 elementary schools in seven of the ten districts in the province of Ontario that were participating in the Parent Participation in the School Improvement Planning project. One district chose not to participate in the Phase 2 survey and another chose to survey only the Phase 1 case school; the districts cited concerns about staff workload as the reason for not participating in the survey. The seven districts were representative of diversity in the province including public and Catholic contexts; English and French jurisdictions; urban, suburban and rural areas; and locations in different regions of the province. They varied in size from approximately 20 to 150 elementary schools. Two thirds of all elementary schools within each district were randomly selected for a total of 226 schools plus the case school in the seventh district. In one district with small, rural schools, a stratified random selection procedure was used to ensure representation of these smaller schools.

Although the school was the unit of analysis for this study, three groups were sampled within each school: administrators, teachers and parents. School principals were instructed to distribute the surveys to those teachers and parents who were most involved in the school improvement planning process in the school and who might also have been a member of the school council.

Table 8.1 reports the intended sample and the total number of respondents for each group. At the individual level, response rates for administrators, teachers and parents were 59%, 42%, and 37%, respectively. Although there were responses from 69% of schools sampled, not all schools had responses from all three sources. The criterion of two or more teacher and parent

respondents along with the administrator response was used to determine the final sample of schools for analysis.

Table 8.1

SIPP Intended and Achieved Samples for Individual Respondents

District Code	Administrators		Teachers		Parents		Total Schools
	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Achieved</i>	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Achieved</i>	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Achieved</i>	
100	96	46	576	190	576	182	55
200	31	20	186	75	186	64	22
300	32	27	192	117	192	94	27
400	26	21	156	87	156	66	22
500	15	14	90	76	90	69	15
600	26	6	156	20	156	30	15
700	1	1	6	6	6	4	1
Total	227	135	1362	571	1362	509	157

Table 8.2 reports the achieved sample for the 100 schools or 44% of the intended sample that met the criterion for inclusion in the analysis. In addition to the administrator, sample schools had a mean of 4.5 teacher and 4 parent respondents with a median of 5 teachers and 4 parents.

Table 8.2

SIPP Intended and Achieved Samples for Schools with 2 or More Respondents

District Code	Administrators		Teachers		Parents	
	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Achieved</i>	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Achieved</i>	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Achieved</i>
100	96	30	576	137	576	124
200	31	15	186	59	186	53
300	32	22	192	102	192	93
400	26	17	156	73	156	59
500	15	14	90	71	90	63
600	26	1	156	4	156	4
700	1	1	6	6	6	4
Total	227	100	1362	452	1362	400

Instruments

Three survey instruments were developed for this study, one for each of the three groups sampled within the school. Content validity for the instruments was addressed in two ways. An extensive literature review of research on school improvement and parent involvement in school improvement planning was used to develop a large pool of items of potential value for this study. By using the literature review in this way, we were able to ensure items were addressing issues relevant to our focus on parent involvement. A second method for ensuring content validity was to use findings from our case study research to make decisions about which items from the pool to include in our draft documents and where additional items needed to be developed to measure local conditions not covered in the literature. Through discussion and review within the research team for the purpose of reducing redundancy and clarifying focus, the item pool was reduced to a size feasible for administration on one occasion. Face validity was ensured by submitting the draft instruments to four researchers who were familiar with the project but had not been involved in the initial development and selection of items.

At the end of the development process, 98 items were available for the three instruments. Items were assigned to a particular group of respondents based on who was most likely to have direct information about the variable being measured. School administrators were given the largest number of items (75) because of their broader knowledge of the planning process and influences on it from within and outside the school. Teachers responded to 54 items and parents to 45. Information for about two thirds of the items was obtained from at least two sources. (Table 8.3 describes the distribution of items among three respondent groups.) Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement using a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with the option of responding not applicable, as well).

Data Collection Procedures

Seven of the ten districts involved in phase 1 of the study agreed to involve their schools in the survey. In agreeing to participate in the survey, a district staff member also agreed to be a contact person for the survey and arrange distribution and collection of materials through the board courier system. The research team prepared a package of materials for each school that included a letter to the principal with instructions for instrument distribution within the school and a set of 13 envelopes, each containing a covering letter and the relevant instrument. Principals were instructed to complete the administrator instrument or give it to a vice-principal depending upon whom was most involved with the school improvement planning process. The six teacher and six parent instruments were also to be given to those individuals most involved in the school improvement planning process and who might also be members of the school council. Upon completion of the survey, respondents were instructed to seal it in the envelope and return it to the board contact identified by the label on the envelope. The unopened envelopes were returned

to the research team by courier. Data from the returned surveys were scanned into an SPSS database for analyses with a school code as the only identification retained in the database.

Reading, writing and mathematics achievement data were obtained from the results of the provincial tests for students in grades 3 and 6. These data were available from the EQAO (the provincial testing agency) website for the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years. Such data for both years were available for 88 of the 100 schools in the sample.

Data Analysis

Individual data files for each group were cleaned and the three data sets were combined into a large file containing all 1215 cases. This became the working file for computing scales and then aggregating the data by school for further analyses. SPSS was used to compute the scales, aggregate the data and then to calculate means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) for all scales measuring the variables, and correlation coefficients. Three items with a negative effect on scale reliability were removed from three scales. Independent sample t-tests and analysis of variance (Oneway ANOVA) procedures were used to compare ratings from the three sources for identical measures to determine whether there was a pattern of ratings by source that could skew results solely due to the number of respondents. Factor analyses using principal components extraction with varimax rotation was undertaken to analyze 17 scales and five aggregate variables to estimate the number of factors measured by specific items and to determine the extent to which our conceptual distinctions could be verified empirically.

Regression analyses and LISREL were used to assess the effects of parent involvement in school improvement planning on outcomes. LISREL was used to assess the direct and indirect effects of school leadership, parent participation and other variables in the framework on student achievement as measured by EQAO scores and on perceived outcomes for students, principals, teachers and parents as reported on the surveys. This path analytic technique allows for testing the validity of inferences about relationships between pairs of variables by controlling for the effects of other variables. Standard multiple regression analyses were used to determine the effects of specific leadership and parent participation variables on mediating and outcome variables in the framework. Sets of independent variables were entered into the regression equation at the same time and each was assessed as though it had been entered into the regression after the other. The results provide a measure of the unique relationship of each leadership or parent participation measure with the dependent variable as well as a measure of their combined effect.

Results

Quality of the Evidence

Table 8.3 reports the data sources (administrators, teachers and/or parents) for each variable, response means and standard deviations aggregated to the school level, scale reliabilities and number of items in each of the scales. The internal reliability of all scales is acceptable, ranging from .72 to .96.

Results of the factor analyses indicated that, in 17 of the 22 analyses, only one factor was extracted from the individual items or scales analyzed. Items measuring teacher leadership loaded on two factors but neither was conceptually cohesive nor did reliability improve when the factors were treated as separate scales. Items measuring principal leadership and communication loaded on two factors; one factor contained items with principal ratings only and the second factor included items also rated by parents. Teacher outcomes loaded on two factors: outcomes for instructional practices and effects on working conditions. Separate scales were developed for each factor extracted from the teacher outcome measures.

Table 8.3

Source of Data, Mean, Standard Deviation, and Reliability for Variables in the Framework

	Source ^a	Mean ^b	SD	Reliability ^c	Number of Items
School Leadership (Aggregate)		3.90	.31	.65	
<i>Principal</i>	A, T, P	4.23	.38	.94	11
<i>Teacher</i>	A, T	3.82	.31	.92	11
<i>Parents</i>	A, P	3.66	.49	.88	4
Parent Participation Aggregate			3.95	.49	.73
<i>School</i>	P	3.85	.54	.92	5
<i>Home</i>	P	4.04	.56	.96	6
External Support & Context (Aggregate)		3.53	.62	.80	
<i>District</i>	A	4.04	.66	.74	4
	A	3.02	.83	.78	4
SI Planning Processes	A, T	3.71	.33	.72	4
Contents of the SIP	A, T	4.11	.30	.79	4
Implementation Processes (Aggregate)		3.74	.30	.74	
<i>Implementation of SIP</i>	A, T	3.74	.39	.85	4
<i>Monitoring of SIP</i>	A, T	3.88	.30	.75	5
<i>Communication of SIP</i>	A, P	3.71	.42	.81	8
<i>Teacher Collaboration</i>	T	3.62	.42	.80	4
Outcomes (Aggregate)		3.67	.32	.52	
<i>Students</i>	A, T, P	3.81	.36	.91	3
<i>Principals</i>	A	3.98	.68	.78	4
<i>Teachers Combined</i>	T	3.35	.40	.75	7
<i>Instruction</i>	T	3.82	.42	.85	4
<i>Working Conditions</i>	T	3.29	.61	.72	3
<i>Parents</i>	A, P	3.53	.49	.93	6
a. A = Administrators, T = Teachers, P = Parents b. Rating Scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree c. Cronbach's Alpha					

Differences in Responses of Parents, Teachers and Administrators

Results of the t-test and ANOVA indicated a mixed pattern of responses from different sources. Administrators generally rated measures higher than teachers, while parents sometimes were higher and other times lower than administrators. However, these differences at the individual level did not appear to affect ratings when aggregated by school since the number of respondents from a particular source did not predict the school's rating of a measure. Principal leadership was given the highest rating ($m = 4.23$), indicating that most respondents agreed their principal was providing effective leadership for the school improvement effort. Parent leadership was given the lowest leadership rating ($m = 3.66$) of the three sources of leadership. Parents generally agreed ($m = 4.04$) they participated in their child's learning at home and were somewhat less certain that they participated at school ($m = 3.85$) or that the school improvement effort had outcomes for parents ($m = 3.53$).

Relationships among Variables

Table 8.4 reports correlation coefficients among all variables included in our framework although some variables have been combined into composite variable for analysis. "Outside school support" is the administrator's perception of support from both the district and province. "School leadership" includes leadership provided by administrators, teachers and parents. The "implementation process" includes implementation procedures, monitoring, communication, and teacher collaboration. Parent participation is most strongly related to outcomes for parents ($r = .61$) but is also significantly related to school leadership ($r = .46$), outcomes for students ($r = .41$), and implementation processes ($r = .33$).

Correlation coefficients also were calculated for student achievement mean scores and achievement gains over two years with the other variables in the framework. None of these correlation coefficients were statistically significant and are not reported in Table 8.4, which is based on the 100 schools in the sample used for analyses for this report.

Table 8.4

Relationships between Variables in the Framework

	OSS	SL	PP	P	C	IP	OS	OPr	OT	Opa
Outside School Support (OSS)	1.00	.14	-.06	.08	-.04	.03	-.06	.26**	.04	.15
School Leadership (SL)		1.00	.46**	.49**	.51**	.79**	.59**	.09	.45**	.70**
Parent Participation (PP)			1.00	.15	.14	.033**	.41**	.04	.15	.61//
Planning Process (P)				1.00	.68**	.69**	.47**	.06	.51**	.15
Content of SI (c)					1.00	.65**	.54**	-.01	.57**	.21*
Implementation Processes (IP)						1.00	.67**	.07	.65**	.49**
Outcome for Students (OS)							1.00	.06	.64**	.52**
Outcome for Principals (OPr)								1.00	.14	.09
Outcome for Teachers (OT)									1.00	.26**
Outcome for Parents (OPa)										1.00
*p < .05, ** p < .01										

Testing the Overall Framework

To further explore the relationships among the variables in the framework, a series of LISREL analyses was conducted using measures of potential outcomes of the school improvement effort as the dependent variables. Two models tested effects on student achievement outcomes in the 88 schools with achievement data; one model used the mean percentage of students performing at levels 3 and 4 on both 2001 and 2002 EQAO tests and the second model used an EQAO gain score based on the mean gain in achievement across grades and subjects from 2001 to 2002. Also tested were models for measures of respondents' perceptions of the outcomes of school improvement on students, principals, teachers and parents in the 100 schools in our sample.

Table 8.5 reports the total effects for the variables in the reduced framework on students' mean EQAO score, achievement gain and the outcomes measured on the survey. Five of the six models met the criteria for assessment of model fit. Only the model for parent outcomes had an inadequate fit with the data.

Table 8.5

Standardized Total Effects for Independent and Mediating Variables on Gains in Student Achievement and Perceived Outcomes for Students, Principals, Teachers and Parents

	Dependent Variables					
	Achievement Scores		Perceived Outcomes for			
	<i>2 Yr Mean</i>	<i>2 YR Gain</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Principals</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Parents</i>
Independent Variables						
<i>Out of school support</i>	.01	.00	-.06*	.25*	-.07	-.02
<i>Parent participation</i>	-.15	-0.5	.20*	.04	-.08	.49*
<i>School leadership</i>	.11	-0.6	.48*	.04	.55*	.25*
Mediating Variables						
<i>Planning</i>	-0.1	.00	.30*	.00	.34*	.09
<i>Implementation Process</i>	.35*	-.17	.45*	.09	.51*	.40*
<i>Contents of SI Plan</i>	-.23	.11	.28*	-.05	.33*	-.06
Percentage of Explained Variance for DV	7%	2%	51%	7%	46%	47%
* Significant effects, $t > 1.96$						
1 Inadequate model; most indices assessing model fit do not meet criterion						

As the second column in Table 8.5 indicates, implementation processes had a significant effect on students' mean achievement over the two years. At the same time, several variables had non-significant, negative, effects on mean achievement. The third column reports results of the test of effects on gain in student achievement; none of the variables had a direct or indirect effect on achievement gain. The model explained only 2% of the variance in achievement gain, less than half the explained variance for mean level of achievement (7%). However, both independent and mediating variables had significant effects on principal, teacher and parent perceptions of positive outcomes for students from the school improvement planning process (fourth column).

Implementation processes had the strongest effect (.48) and parent participation had the second weakest, but still significant, effect (.20) on student outcomes. Out of school support was the only variable with any effect on outcomes for principals. School leadership (.55) and implementation processes (.51) had the strongest effect on perceived outcomes for teachers, whereas parent participation had no significant effect. Although parent participation (.49) had the strongest effect on in the model testing outcomes for parents, the evidence must be treated with caution because the model as a whole did not meet the fit criteria. The model testing effects on perceived outcomes for students explained the largest proportion of variation in outcomes (51%), whereas the model testing achievement gain explained the smallest variation (2%). Almost seven

times as much of the variation in outcomes for teachers as compared with principals was explained by this model (46% vs. 7%). To explore further the relative strength of the relationships between specific conditions comprising the composite variables and mediating and outcome variables, a series of regression analyses was undertaken. Particular attention was paid to identifying relative effects related to sources of school leadership and nature of parent participation.

Table 8.6 summarizes the amount of explained variance of individual leadership sources as well as the effect from all sources combined. Both principal and teacher leadership had significant relationships with the mediating variables, although teacher leadership had a stronger relationship with planning and content of the school improvement effort. Both sources had a similar relationship with implementation processes, for which the combined effect was the strongest of all the variables with 76% of variance explained. Parent leadership did not have a significant unique relationship with any of the mediating variables.

The pattern of relationships between leadership sources and outcomes was mixed. Principal leadership had the strongest relationship with perceived outcomes for students, whereas parent leadership did not have an independent relationship with student outcomes. None of the leadership sources was related to outcomes for principals. The only significant relationship for parent leadership was with outcomes for parents. Principal leadership had a small, significant effect on improved working conditions for teachers. Teacher leadership did not have a unique relationship with working conditions but did have an effect on changes in instruction. None of the sources, individually or combined, had an effect on either measure of student achievement (mean annual achievement or gains in achievement over two years).

Table 8.6

Effects of Leadership Sources on Mediating and Dependent Variables

	Leadership Source				
	Principal	Teachers	Parents	Combined Effects	
	<i>R² unique</i>	<i>R² unique</i>	<i>R² unique</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>F (9.96)</i>
Effects on Mediating Variables					
Planning Process	.04	.11	ns	.38	21.37***
Content of SI	.05	.12	ns	.45	27.87***
Implementation Process	.10	.13	ns	.76	104.96***
Effects on Perceived Outcomes for					
Students	.13	.04	ns	.46	29.23***
Principals	ns	ns	ns	ns	0.51
Parents	.08	ns	.22	.54	40.35***
Teachers (Aggregate)	.07	.05	ns	.31	15.78***
Teacher Instruction	ns	.16	ns	.38	21.46
Improved Working Conditions	.07	ns	ns	.10	4.74**
Effects on Student Achievement					
Mean Achievement	ns	ns	ns	ns	0.43 ¹
Achievement Gain	ns	ns	ns	ns	0.50 ¹
Note: Each row summarizes a separate regression analysis run to determine how much variation was explained by each source of leadership. The sample for the mediating and outcome variables measured with the survey was 100 schools and for achievement outcomes was 88 schools. 1 The degrees for freedom differed for the achievement sample resulting in an F Change of (3.84) ** p < .01, *** p < .001					

Table 8.7 uses the same procedure as used for Table 8.6 to assess the relative strength of the relationships between school and home parent participation and each of the mediating and outcome variables. Parent participation had a significant relationship with implementation processes but not with either planning or content of the school improvement effort. Further analyses with individual components of the implementation process (not reported on Table 8.7), found that both forms of parent participation had a significant relationship with communication (combined effect .27 [$F(2,97) = 20.80, p < .001$]) but no significant effect on monitoring, teacher collaboration or implementation effectiveness. The significant relationship with communication might be due to same source bias since parents provided data for most communication items but not for the other three variables in implementation process construct.

Parent participation had a significant relationship with three outcome variables: perceived outcomes for students (.16), perceived outcomes for parents (.37), and mean student achievement (.07). Parent participation at home had the strongest relationship with perceived outcome for students, whereas parent participation at school had the strongest relationship with outcomes of

the school improvement effort for parents. The relationship with mean student achievement is somewhat contradictory and puzzling. Although the combined effect is a small and positive, the size of that effect is reduced by the significant negative effect of parent participation at home on annual mean achievement and the positive effect of participation at school.

Table 8.6
Effects of Parent Participation

	Parent Participation			
	At Home	At School	Combined Effects	
	R^2_{unique}	R^2_{unique}	R^2	$F (2.97)$
Effects on Mediating Variables				
Planning Process	ns	ns	ns	1.69
Content of SI	ns	ns	ns	1.69
Implementation Process	ns	ns	.09	16.12**
Effects on Perceived Outcomes for				
Students	.07	ns	.16	29.23***
Principals	ns	ns	ns	0.21
Parents	.03	.15	.37	30.23***
Teachers (Aggregate)	ns	ns	ns	1.76
Teacher Instruction	.05	ns	.03	2.48
Improved Working Conditions	ns	ns	ns	.77
Effects on Student Achievement				
Mean Achievement	-.09	.04	.07	4.30* ¹
Achievement Gain	ns	ns	ns	1.00 ¹
Note: Each row summarizes a separate regression analysis run to determine how much variation was explained by each form of parent participation. The sample for the mediating and outcome variables measured with the survey was 100 schools and for achievement outcomes was 88 schools. ¹ The degrees for freedom differed for the achievement sample resulting in an F Change of (2.85) * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$				

Summary and Recommendations

This section of the chapter draws together the results of our literature review, case study and survey data to answer four of the five questions which served as the focus of the study (our data had little useful to say about effective strategies for increasing the involvement of the community in support of student learning).

Factors Which Most Influence the Nature and Success of School Improvement Planning and Implementation

There was evidence in the literature to suggest that the most powerful factors were principal leadership and the leadership of school improvement (SI) teams. SI teams provide a structure for collaboration among leaders, between teachers and administrators, and when they are included, parents, as well. Evidence from prior research also highlights the importance of school improvement focusing on a small number of manageable goals, and adequate time to work on school improvement initiatives. This literature awards considerable importance to parental roles, as well, but these are largely roles in the home, not the school. There is little reason to believe, from this literature, that parent involvement in school improvement planning would add significant value to the outcomes of school improvement processes for students.

Our case study evidence suggested that the most influential factors impacting on the nature and success of school improvement planning included: principal leadership; the school leadership team/teacher leadership; stakeholder ownership of the SIP; the content of SIP plans; a SIP process that includes ongoing monitoring and communication; an improvement oriented school culture; adequate support and resources; and parent involvement.

Survey results awarded greatest importance to school leadership – especially the leadership of the principal. Of considerable importance, as well, are out-of-school support (especially important to principals), the quality of SI planning processes, and the content of such plans. The most productive planning processes, according to these data, are inclusive, ongoing and informed by good data. Adequate time must be available for such planning and people should be acknowledged for their part in the process. The most productive content of a school improvement plan is student focused and targeted on achieving a small number of important goals. Parent participation at home had a significant direct effect on perceived student outcomes.

In sum, then, key factors associated with successful school improvement across all three sources of data include:

- principal leadership;
- the leadership of teachers, and possibly parents, as members of a school improvement team;
- a small number of manageable improvement goals clearly focused on students;
- data-driven decision-making about the means and ends of school improvement;
- effective implementation of SIP including time to do school improvement work; and
- parent participation in the home.

Involving Parents, School Councils, and the School Community in School Improvement Planning

Little detailed information is available from the literature about the best ways to involve parents and other members of the community in SIP. What can be concluded from this evidence is that at least passive support for a school's improvement efforts is important, especially from the principal's perspective. In the case of schools perceived to be underperforming, parents are

capable of exerting considerable political influence on school staffs, senior district administrators and trustees to intervene. Such influence, however, is much more likely among economically advantaged parents through the formation of community networks and their association with non-school professionals (AERJ). Prior evidence suggests that when parents assume leadership roles on school councils, in close partnership with principals, their influence on both the content and processes of school improvement is considerable.

In our case studies, parents, school councils and the school community were involved in a variety of ways in the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans. In the early stages, parents contributed important information that helped to shape school plans through vehicles such as surveys, interviews and meetings. They participated in school improvement teams and in school councils as partners with teachers and administrators in creating workable plans. School councils served as vehicles for communication about plans and actions, and for approval of project participation and school improvement plans.

During implementation, parents and school councils were instrumental in organizing parent involvement activities. They helped teachers with some of the other school improvement initiatives as well. In one case, a parent ran a highly successful SIP project on her own. In the main, parents and school councils played a support role during implementation. During the monitoring/revision stage of SIP, some school improvement teams and schools in which parents were members, played a monitoring role.

While our case study data suggest quite promising effects of active parent involvement in SIP, our survey results conform more closely to prior evidence about parent roles. Parent participation was related, in our survey results, to the quality of implementation processes, as well as both perceived student outcomes and such positive outcomes for parents as a greater understanding of the schools' programs. But parents themselves were more positive about participation in their child's learning at home than at school and parent leadership was rated lowest (although still quite positively) among all three sources of leadership for school improvement planning.

We interpret the results of our three sources of evidence as generally warranting the continued efforts of schools to involve parents in their children's education both at home and at school. Helping parents productively engage their children in learning at home should remain a priority, however. This is the case because of the strength of the evidence indicating powerful effects of such involvement (e.g. Barth, 1979; Fantini, 1980; Smith & Nerenberg, 1981; Yap & Enoki, 1995; Ziegler, 1987) and because this is a more feasible option for the significant proportion of parents who, for example, have very little time left over from demanding work schedules to be in schools.

Extent and Nature of Effects of School Improvement Plans on Student Achievement and Other Factors Associated With Effective Schools

A long-standing and still quite active body of research has devoted itself to uncovering the characteristics of effective schools (e.g. Austin, 1989; Mortimore et al, 1988; Teddlie &

Reynolds, 2000). And while the results of such efforts are regularly subjected to critical scrutiny (e.g. Cuban, 1993; Elliott, 1996; Slee et al, 1998), they stand in sharp contrast, as we demonstrated in Chapter 2, to the meagre body of evidence about the effects of school improvement planning. This is not to say that we know little about how to create effective schools; but it is to say that school improvement planning as we typically view it (described in Chapter 2) has not emerged as one of the most promising strategies.

The most productive initiatives for improving schools according to the evidence include, for example, creating professional learning communities (e.g. Toole & Louis, 2002), building collaboration cultures (e.g. Fieman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Hargreaves & Macmillan, 1991; Little, 1989), providing school-based professional development for teachers (e.g. Fullan & Watson, 1997), involving teachers in action research (e.g. Wideman, 2002), introducing high stakes student assessment procedures, and implementing comprehensive school reform programs (e.g. Datnow et al, in press; Herman, 1999). Indeed, if school improvement planning is considered a genus of the species, “strategic planning”, as an organizational improvement strategy, Mintzberg (1994) declared it “dead” ten years ago (see Chapter 2 for major alternatives).

So prior research offers no reason for assuming that school improvement planning ought to result in student achievement gains, unless, of course, one expands the meaning of SIP to include the strategies we just listed. The design of our case studies did not address the relationship between planning and achievement directly. That evidence did, however, suggest that when school improvement plans were focused on student learning, and when those plans were well implemented, principals, parents and teachers perceived them to have a positive impact on student learning.

The degree to which SIP impacts on student achievement, using direct measures of such achievement, was tested by the survey portion of our research. Two percent of the variation in student achievement gains across the schools in our sample were explained by the combined effects of all variables in our framework. Acknowledging the limits of our measure of student achievement gains, this is a modest amount of explained variation, to say the least. Comparing this modest amount of explained variation with the relatively large proportion of variation in perceived student outcomes (51%) indicates just how easy it is to underestimate the difficulty and complexity of improving student achievement on a school-wide basis.

These results also raise doubts about the common practice in Ontario, as in many other jurisdictions, of encouraging schools to use the results of province- or state-wide achievement tests as a stimulus for school improvement planning. Such encouragement flies in the face of not just one, but two, serious problems. Not only, as we have suggested, is there weak evidence, at best, that school improvement planning is a productive consumer of a school’s scarce improvement energies, but the results of province- or state-wide achievement tests are unreliable at the school level (more precisely for Ontario, the reliability is unknown). It is not hard to imagine, then, a school staff devoting enormous energies to a weak improvement strategy focused on the wrong goals. It is time to rethink the paradigm.

The most obvious rejoinders to our call for rethinking the paradigm are twofold. First, some will argue that a good school improvement plan can encompass, as strategies, many of the more powerful improvement initiatives, examples of which we have mentioned. We argue, in response, that by allowing SIP to be the organizing concept for improvement we perpetuate a linear, superficial way of thinking about the improvement problem, whereas powerful solutions are more likely to be non-linear, indirect and embedded deeply in the “guts” of a school’s anatomy – its culture, its reward structures, the dispositions and motivations of those attracted to it as a workplace, and the basic “technologies” it uses to accomplish its goals.

A second rejoinder to our call for rethinking the paradigm concerns the unreliability of most province- or state-wide achievement data at the school level. In acknowledgement of such unreliability, schools are routinely advised to supplement such data with their own measures and estimates – to use such data as “just one source” of information on which to base their school improvement goals. This advice is problematic on several grounds. First, as our case study schools illustrate so well, schools rarely heed this advice. Perhaps this is because of the perceived authority associated with the province’s data. Perhaps it is because of the public nature of provincial results and the stakes for school staff in not performing well. Perhaps it is because schools lack the resources or capacities (or both) for collecting such data. Second, the most likely source of additional data about student achievement and gains in such achievement is teachers’ own estimates. Just how accurate such estimates are likely to be has been the subject of debate for many years. But at least our survey results indicated that teachers’ estimates can be dramatically different from the results of direct measures; the question of which is more accurate remains to be answered.

Strategies for Increasing the Involvement of Parents in Their Children’s Education

Prior research (eg. Sanders & Epstein, 1998) concerning this question offers many suggestions for involving parents especially in the home but also school. There are general conditions that encourage parental involvement such as:

- school recognition of the value of parent involvement in all its different forms;
- school vision, programs and plans that include parents as partners;
- school leadership that encourages parent involvement;
- school climate that welcomes parents; and
- school communication that is open, on-going and invitational.

Parent involvement in the home (eg. Epstein et al, 1996) is increased through such specific initiatives as:

- positive communication with parents and families about their role in their children’s education;
- specific instructions from teachers about how parents can help their children at home;
- subject-specific school-family training and collaboration eg. workshops and home visits;

- involve parents who are hard to reach through phone calls and visits, translation of written materials, and enlisting the aid of community liaisons or family members; and
- requests from children to their parents for their involvement.

Strategies evident in prior research (eg. Bechely & Bernstein, 1998) for involving parents more extensively in schools include:

- information to parents on ways they can be involved at the school;
- personal invitations from principals, teachers, parents and children to parents about participating in specific activities;
- training and support for school staff and parents;
- develop clear understanding of roles, responsibilities and boundaries regarding group decision-making;
- structure school committees in ways that will encourage parent involvement eg.
- avoid jargon that would cause parent discomfort; and
- recruit hard-to-reach parents by providing childcare, transportation, and translation.

In case study schools, parent involvement was an important part of the school improvement process. Parents were encouraged to participate in a myriad of ways. While parents were invited to engage in activities in which they might not have had previous experience, an effort was made to make them feel comfortable with their level and type of involvement. Parents who were newer to schools, who were less familiar with the working language of schools, and who were less educated were drawn to social activities. Then, schools tried to build on this involvement by inviting parents into other school-related activities. In some schools more parents became engaged in student learning initiatives. Parents who had experience with schools and who were better educated became involved in school councils, SIP teams, and in decision-making roles. Additional strategies that were utilized by schools included: principals, teachers and parents issued personal invitations to parents; special events, curriculum nights and reporting days were scheduled; varied communication methods were employed eg. teachers made good new calls home; teachers sent home learning activities with specific instruction for parents; parents' needs and responsibilities were accounted for eg. parents' schedules and comfort levels with the content of discussions were considered in meeting design; and parents were recognized for their contributions.

Our survey evidence is not a direct source of information about strategies for increasing parent involvement. However, taken together, evidence about the importance of data-driven decision-making and parent participation in school improvement planning also suggest a direction for schools that is underutilized. In many of today's schools one need not have active parent participation on a school improvement team or school council in order to understand and account for parent views and preferences. Indeed, those parents who are active in such direct ways do not necessarily represent the views of the entire school's parent population (eg. O'Donoghue & Dimmick, 1996; Seitsinger, 1998). More systematically collecting data about parent views and preferences through focus groups, targeted interviews, phone surveys and the

like is a strategy with considerable promise; it gives voice to those parents who are largely disempowered by their own past experiences with school, competing obligations, reluctance to challenge those in positions of authority, or lack of knowledge about how to exert influence on behalf of their children. As some evidence now suggests, for example, school councils are sometimes dominated by parents whose powerful advocacy for the welfare of their own children can perpetuate inequities for others (eg. McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999).

Implications for Policy and Practice

For policy makers, this evidence strongly recommends:

1. Devoting considerably more attention to enabling parents' direct involvement in the education of their children.
2. Including among the tasks for which districts are held accountable, the development of frameworks and tools for schools to use in regularly collecting representative evidence from family and community members about local priorities for the school's attention.
3. Have the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) clarify the reliability of its test results at the school level and align the uses recommended for these data with the purposes they are technically capable of serving.

For district and school practitioners, the evidence strongly recommends that:

4. Parent and community views about district and school priorities be assessed using procedures capable of representing the range and depth of views of parents and the community as a whole.
5. Rely much more extensively, than is typical at present, on sources of data about school priorities in addition to EQAO results.
6. For purposes of improving the quality of education for students, rely much less than presently is the case on linear or "mechanical" models of school planning and much more on approaches to improvement for which there is better evidence of significant effects (e.g. creation of professional learning communities, leadership development).

For parents, evidence from the study suggests that:

7. They devote most of the time that they have available for children's schooling (their own and other's) to directly assisting children master the school curriculum.
8. When they feel strongly that changes in the school are required, approach school and district leaders in coordination with other like-minded parents, to request/insist on such change.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning Project

Interview Questions: First Round

Part A: Initial Planning

1. What has happened so far in your school with regard to the school improvement planning process?
 - a) How did your school develop a plan?
 - b) What is included in your plan?
2. What are your expectations with regard to the school improvement planning process?
 - a) What were your initial expectations?
 - b) Have your expectations changed as a result of your experience in the school improvement planning process?
 - c) To what extent have your expectations been met?
3. Who has been involved in the school improvement planning process & how?
 - a) Who or what groups are/have been involved in the school improvement planning for your school?
 - b) What is/has been the nature of that person's or group's participation in, or contribution to, the planning process?
4. How did the school improvement planning process work for your school?
 - a) What has worked well or been successful? Why?
 - b) What has not worked well? Why?
 - c) What changes might you suggest for the future? Why?

Part B: Implementation of the School Improvement Plan

5. What has happened so far in your school to implement or to follow through on the school improvement plan?
 - a) How have you implemented the plan?
 - b) What have you implemented?
6. Who has been involved in implementing or taking action on the plan and how?
 - a) Who or what group are/have been involved in implementing the plan?
 - b) What is/has been the nature of that person's or group's participation in, or contribution to, implementing the plan?

7. What has been the impact on your school of implementing the school improvement plan?
 - a) What aspects of the implementation process worked well or have been helpful? Why?
 - b) What aspects of the implementation process have not worked well or have been troublesome? Why?
 - c) What changes might you suggest for the future? Why?
8. What advice would you give to other schools beginning a school improvement planning process to help them make a positive contribution to teaching and learning?
9. Do you have any other comments or insights to share?

The Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning Project

Interview Questions: Stage 2 Data Collection, Spring 2001

Update on Process in School

1. I interviewed people in this school last fall so I was hoping that you could tell me generally about what has happened with respect to the school improvement initiative since that time?
2. What has this additional experience with school improvement planning processes taught you?

Roles and Structures

3. Tell me about what you and others have been doing or contributing to the school improvement planning process over the past few months?
4. What factors influence the contribution that you and others have been able to make to the school improvement planning process? What would be the key factors from your perspective?
5. Is there anything you would suggest that schools could do to help you and others contribute effectively?
6. Have the structure(s) and the people involved in the school improvement planning process changed? How has this worked from your perspective?

Successes and Difficulties at this Stage

7. What successes have you experienced with the project recently compared to earlier? Why?
8. What difficulties have you experienced with the project recently compared to earlier? Why?

Hindsight

9. Knowing what you know now, how would you approach school improvement planning if you moved to another school in the fall?

The Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning Project

Interview questions for participants: Stage 3 Data Collection, Winter 2002

Update on Process in School

1. I interviewed people in this school last spring so I was hoping that you could tell me generally about what has happened with respect to the school improvement initiative since that time?
2. What has this additional experience with school improvement processes taught you?

Roles and Structures

3. Tell me about what you and others have been doing or contributing to the school improvement project over the past few months?
4. What factors influence the contribution that you and others have been able to make to the school improvement project? What would be the key factors from your perspective?
5. Is there anything you would suggest that schools could do to help you and others contribute effectively?
6. Have the structure(s) and the people involved in the school improvement project changed? How has this worked from your perspective?

Examples of possible further sub-questions to consider under questions 3-6.

- To your knowledge, what have been the specific roles of parents, school council, teams or committees, administration/principal, board, or others?
- How do people, especially parents, feel about the nature of their contribution?
- How do people feel about the nature of others' contributions?
- What types of parent involvement are being encouraged, with what effect?
- How many people, especially parents, are involved more or less directly in the process?
- Is it the same people, especially parents, who are usually involved in school initiatives and meetings or has involvement expanded?
- What has been the impact of any turnover of participants?

Status of the Project

7. Is the progress of the project being tracked? How?

Examples of possible further sub-questions to consider under question 7:

- Has there been any monitoring of the project and plan?
- Has any revision of the plan taken place?
- What evidence or indicators are being used to track the progress?

8. What successes have you experienced with the project recently compared to earlier? Why?

9. What difficulties have you experienced with the project recently compared to earlier? Why? How have these difficulties been resolved?

Examples of possible further sub-questions to consider under question 9:

- Has there been resistance to the project? If so, has it been resolved? How?
- Are there issues around the involvement or the role of parents in the project? If so, have they been resolved? How?

10. Based on your experience, what would you say are the key factors that affect the progress and outcomes of school improvement initiatives?

Other Insights

11. Do you have any other comments or insights to share?

The Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning Project

Questions for Participants in Round Four Interviews, 2002/03

Update on the school improvement planning initiative

1. What has been accomplished through the school improvement initiative at your school?
e.g. of outcomes - professional learning, increased student learning or achievement, school culture changes, increased parent involvement in educational matters at home or at school
 - a) Has your experience with the school improvement planning project influenced your approach to other improvement initiatives e.g. the School Board Improvement Plan or Early Reading Target Setting?
2. Would you say that the school improvement initiative has been successfully implemented at your school? Why/Why not?
3. What are the key factors to be considered for the successful implementation of school improvement initiatives? Why?
 - a) Are there any connections or linkages between factors?

Parent participation in school improvement planning initiatives

4. In what ways were parents involved in the school improvement planning process through the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages?
 - a) Did they have a decision-making role?
 - b) Did they provide input through the school council?
 - c) Did they provide input through other means eg. survey, interviews?
 - d) Did they participate in school improvement teams with teachers and administrators?
 - e) Did they engage in school improvement activities? Did they have a leadership role in any of these activities?
5. How much influence did parents have on decisions made regarding the school improvement initiative?
e.g. same as, or more or less than the principal?, the teachers?, etc.
6. What was the impact of having parents participate in the school improvement initiative?
 - a) Has there been an impact on student learning or outcomes?
 - b) Has there been increased understanding between home and school?
 - c) Was there increased conflict or cooperation between home and school?

7. What forms of parent participation in school improvement planning processes were the most helpful? Least helpful? Why?

8. What are the key factors, people or activities that are the most helpful for involving parents in school improvement decisions and initiatives?

Parent Involvement & Equity

9. What is the cultural/language and economic background of parents & families in your school?

10. What is the cultural/language and economic background of parents who were involved in school improvement decisions and initiatives?

11. How did parents' cultural and economic background influence their participation in school improvement decisions and initiatives?

12. What are the most productive ways of involving parents in school improvement planning decisions and initiatives when language, culture or economic status may be a barrier?

Other Comments or Insights

13. Do you have any other comments or insights to share?

Appendix B: Survey Instruments

The Parent Involvement in School Improvement Planning Project

Administrator Survey¹

1. At what stage in the school improvement process is your school?
 - a) Initial design/planning, i.e., developing your first school improvement plan
 - b) Initial implementation, i.e., implementing your first school improvement plan
 - c) Ongoing implementation/revision/monitoring/evaluation, i.e., revising the plan to reflect new priorities and learning about what does or does not work, implementing activities
 - d) Institutionalization, i.e., school improvement planning is an established part of the way we work

General Assessment of the Impact of the School Improvement Process

2. To what extent do you agree that your school improvement effort has been positive for the school.
3. To what extent do you agree that your school improvement effort has been positive for you.

School Improvement Planning Processes

To what extent do you agree that your school improvement plan:

4. Takes priority over other initiatives from outside the school.
5. Includes re-examination and adaptation on a regular basis.
6. Involves all stakeholders in the school community in its development.
7. Is influenced by your opinion.

Content of the School Improvement Plan

To what extent do you agree that the content of your school improvement plan:

8. Is focused on improving student learning.
9. Addresses important priorities for your school.
10. Outlines actions that seem appropriate for accomplishing these priorities.
11. Is determined, in large part, by those outside the school.
12. Includes strategies to enhance parent involvement in student learning.

¹ Response options to all but the first three items were: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

Implementation of the School Improvement Plan

To what extent do you agree that implementation of your school improvement plan:

13. Proceeds fairly smoothly with problems dealt with as they arise.
14. Has a reasonable timeframe for accomplishing goals and actions.
15. Involves all stakeholders in the school community.
16. Increases collaboration between teachers and parents.

School Improvement Monitoring

To what extent do you agree that monitoring of your school's improvement plan:

17. Is undertaken by a school leadership group (including teachers and parents).
18. Is undertaken by school administrators.
19. Is based information from a variety of sources.
20. Is based on the use of valid and reliable data.
21. Is reported to the school community.

Communication and School Improvement

To what extent do you agree that:

22. Communication with parents about the school improvement effort has been effective.
23. The following methods for communicating with parents about the school improvement effort are effective:
 - a) written communication e.g., newsletters
 - b) using technology e.g., emails, websites
 - c) meetings, e.g., school council
 - d) verbal communication e.g., person-to-person phone call
24. The school's communication with parents clarifies how parents can contribute to the school improvement effort.
25. People involved in school improvement meetings communicate effectively with one another.
26. Parents on school improvement teams communicate effectively with other parents about the school improvement initiative.

Principal Leadership

To what extent do you agree that you:

27. Play a key leadership role in the school improvement initiative.
28. Consider the school improvement effort to be a priority.
29. Protect the school improvement initiative from the competing priorities of others.
30. Help create a climate that encourages engagement in the school by parents.
31. Play a key role in effectively communicating about the school improvement effort.
32. Orient new staff to the school improvement effort.
33. Select new staff who are likely to help further the school improvement effort.

- 34. Encourage the learning efforts of the school community.
- 35. Arrange for resources to facilitate the school improvement effort.
- 36. Are effective in building community support for the school improvement effort.
- 37. Oversee the school improvement effort.

Teacher Leadership

To what extent do you agree that teachers:

- 38. Play a key leadership role in the school improvement effort.
- 39. Have the opportunity to lead in the school improvement effort.
- 40. Coordinate the implementation of the plan in the school.
- 41. Consider the school improvement effort to be a priority for their attention.
- 42. Help create a climate that encourages engagement in the school by parents.
- 43. Play a key role in effectively communicating about the school improvement effort.
- 44. Orient new staff to the school improvement effort.
- 45. Select new staff who are likely to help further the school improvement effort.
- 46. Are effective in building community support for the school improvement effort.
- 47. Help colleagues acquire new skills and knowledge.
- 48. Persuade colleagues to implement the plan in their classroom.

Parent Leadership

To what extent do you agree that parents:

- 49. Play a key leadership role in the school improvement effort.
- 50. Play a leadership role in the planning stage of the school improvement effort.
- 51. Have a significant influence on school improvement decision-making.
- 52. Have direct responsibility for implementing parent involvement initiatives.

District Support and Context

To what extent does the district:

- 53. Visibly supports the school improvement effort.
- 54. Provides resources for the school improvement effort.
- 55. Helps determine the content of the school improvement plan.
- 56. Helps determine the process to be used for school improvement.
- 57. Mandates policy and programs to be implemented that result in attention being diverted from the school's priorities under the school improvement planning initiative.

Provincial Support and Context

To what extent does the province:

- 58. Visibly supports the school improvement efforts
- 59. Provides resources for the school improvement effort. .

- 60. Helps determine the content of the school improvement plan.
- 61. Helps determine the process to be used for school improvement.
- 62. Mandates policy and programs to be implemented that result in attention being diverted from the school's priorities under the school improvement planning initiative.

Outcomes for Principals of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that you have:

- 63. Learned a great deal about school improvement.
- 64. Changed your administrative practices.
- 65. Become more involved in instructional issues in the school.
- 66. Improved your feedback to teachers about their instructional practices.
- 67. A significantly increased workload.

Outcomes for Parents of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that the school improvement effort has resulted in:

- 68. The school community working together effectively on school improvement.
- 69. More learning opportunities for parents.
- 70. The community developing a better impression of the school.
- 71. Better understanding by parents of their role and responsibilities regarding their children's education.
- 72. More involvement by parents in student learning.
- 73. More involvement by parents in school decision-making.

Outcomes for Students of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that the school improvement effort has resulted:

- 74. Better programs for students.
- 75. Increased student learning.
- 76. Increased student enthusiasm about school.

Demographic Information

- 1. How many years have you been a principal?
☐ 1 to 2 ☐ 3 to 4 ☐ 5 to 6 ☐ 7 to 10 ☐ 11 to 15 ☐ 16+
- 2. How many years have you been at your present school?
☐ 1 to 2 ☐ 3 to 4 ☐ 5 to 6 ☐ 7 to 10 ☐ 11 to 15 ☐ 16+
- 3. Your gender: ☐ female ☐ male
- 4. Age: ☐ less than 35 years ☐ 35 to 39 years ☐ 40 to 45 ☐ 46 to 49
☐ 50 to 55 ☐ 56+

5. Your highest level of education is:
- ☐ university degree
 - ☐ some post-graduate courses
 - ☐ masters
 - ☐ doctorate
6. Which category best describes your students' backgrounds?
- ☐ mostly economically disadvantaged families
 - ☐ some economically disadvantaged and some middle class families
 - ☐ mostly middle class families
 - ☐ some middle class and some upper middle class families
 - ☐ mostly upper middle class families
 - ☐ highly mixed with a wide range in family economic conditions
7. Which best describes the ethnic composition of your school?
- ☐ predominantly made up of one ethnic group
 - ☐ predominantly made up of two ethnic groups
 - ☐ somewhat mixed with no dominant group of more than 50%
 - ☐ highly mixed with numerous ethnic groups
8. Approximately what percentage of your students do not have English or French as their first language?
- ☐ less than 5%
 - ☐ 6% to 25%
 - ☐ 26% to 50%
 - ☐ 51% to 75%
 - ☐ more than 75%

Thank you very much for completing this survey.

The Parent Involvement in School Improvement Planning Project

Teacher Survey

1. At what stage in the school improvement process is your school?
 - a) Initial design/planning, i.e., developing your first school improvement plan.
 - b) Initial implementation, i.e., implementing your first school improvement plan.
 - c) Ongoing implementation/revision/monitoring/evaluation, i.e., revising the plan to reflect new priorities and learning about what does or does not work, implementing activities.
 - d) Institutionalization, i.e., school improvement planning is an established part of the way we work.

General Assessment of the Impact of the School Improvement Process

2. To what extent do you agree that your school improvement effort has been positive for the school.
3. To what extent do you agree that your school improvement effort has been positive for you.

School Improvement Planning Process

To what extent do you agree that your school improvement plan:

4. Takes priority over other initiatives from outside the school.
5. Includes re-examination and adaptation on a regular basis.
6. Involves all stakeholders in the school community in its development.
7. Is influenced by your opinion.

Content of the School Improvement Plan

To what extent do you agree that the content of your school improvement plan:

8. Is focused on improving student learning.
9. Addresses important priorities for your school.
10. Outlines actions that seem appropriate for accomplishing these priorities.
11. Is determined, in large part, by those outside the school.
12. Includes strategies to enhance parent involvement in student learning.

Implementation of the School Improvement Plan

To what extent do you agree that implementation of your school improvement plan:

- 13. Proceeds fairly smoothly with problems dealt with as they arise.
- 14. Has a reasonable timeframe for accomplishing goals and actions.
- 15. Involves all stakeholders in the school community.
- 16. Increases collaboration between teachers and parents.

School Improvement Monitoring

To what extent do you agree that monitoring of your school's improvement plan:

- 17. Is undertaken by a school leadership group (including teachers and parents).
- 18. Is undertaken by school administrators.
- 19. Is based on information from a variety of sources.
- 20. Is based on the use of valid and reliable data.
- 21. Is reported to the school community.

Principal Leadership

To what extent do you agree that the principal:

- 22. Plays a key leadership role in the school improvement initiative.
- 23. Considers our school improvement effort a priority.
- 24. Protects our initiatives from the competing priorities of others.
- 25. Helps create a climate that encourages engagement in the school by parents.
- 26. Plays a key role in effectively communicating about our improvement effort.
- 27. Orients new staff to the school improvement effort.
- 28. Selects new staff who are likely to help us further our improvement effort.
- 29. Encourages the learning efforts of the school community.
- 30. Arranges for resources to facilitate school improvement effort.
- 31. Is effective in building community support for our school's improvement effort.
- 32. Oversees the school improvement planning process.

Teacher Leadership

To what extent do you agree that teachers:

- 33. Play a key leadership role in the school improvement effort.
- 34. Had the opportunity to lead in our school improvement effort.
- 35. Coordinate the implementation of the plan in the school.
- 36. Consider our school improvement effort a priority for their attention.
- 37. Help create a climate that encourages engagement in the school by parents.
- 38. Play a key role in effectively communicating about our improvement effort.
- 39. Orient new staff to the school improvement effort.
- 40. Select new staff who are likely to help us further our improvement effort.

- 41. Are effective in building community support for our school's improvement effort.
- 42. Help colleagues acquire new skills and knowledge.
- 43. Persuade colleagues to implement the plan in their classroom.

Teacher Collaboration

To what extent do you agree that teachers:

- 44. Collaborate regularly in making and implementing decisions related to our school improvement effort.
- 45. Have adequate time to work together on school improvement matters.
- 46. Support the school improvement planning process in our school.
- 47. Work together as a team.

Outcomes for Teachers of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that teachers have:

- 48. Learned a great deal about their jobs.
- 49. Changed their classroom practices.
- 50. Become more collaborative.
- 51. More learning opportunities.
- 52. A higher turnover rate.
- 53. Decreased morale.
- 54. A significantly increased workload.

Outcomes for Students of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that the school improvement effort has resulted in:

- 55. Better programs for students.
- 56. Increased student learning.
- 57. Increased student enthusiasm about school.

Demographic Information

- 1. How many years have you been a teacher?
☐ 1 to 2 ☐ 3 to 4 ☐ 5 to 6 ☐ 7 to 10 ☐ 11 to 15 ☐ 16+
- 2. How many years have you been at your present school?
☐ 1 to 2 ☐ 3 to 4 ☐ 5 to 6 ☐ 7 to 10 ☐ 11 to 15 ☐ 16+
- 3. Your gender: ☐ female ☐ male
- 4. Age: ☐ less than 35 years ☐ 35 to 39 years ☐ 40 to 45 ☐ 46 to 49 ☐ 50 to 55 ☐ 56+

5. Your highest level of education is:

- ☐ university degree
- ☐ some post-graduate courses
- ☐ masters
- ☐ doctorate

Thank you for completing this survey. Please seal it in the envelope provided and return it to the school office.

The Parent Involvement in School Improvement Planning Project

Parent Survey

1. At what stage in the school improvement process is your school
 - a) Initial design/planning, i.e., developing your first school improvement plan
 - b) Initial implementation, i.e., implementing your first school improvement plan
 - c) Ongoing implementation/revision/monitoring/evaluation, i.e., revising the plan to reflect new priorities and learning about what does or does not work, implementing activities
 - d) Institutionalization, i.e., school improvement planning is an established part of the way we work

General

2. To what extent do you agree that your school improvement effort has been positive for the school.
3. To what extent do you agree that your school improvement effort has been positive for you.

Communication and School Improvement

To what extent do you agree that:

4. Communication about the school improvement efforts with parents has been effective.
5. The following methods for communicating with parents about school improvement efforts are effective:
 - a) written communication e.g., newsletters
 - b) using technology e.g., emails, websites
 - c) meetings, e.g., school council
 - d) verbal communication, e.g., person-to-person phone call
6. The school's communication with parents clarifies how parents can contribute to the school improvement effort.

Principal Leadership

To what extent do you agree that the principal:

7. Plays a key leadership role in the school improvement initiative.
8. Helps create a climate that encourages involvement in the school by parents.
9. Plays a key role in communicating about the school improvement effort.
10. Arranges for resources to facilitate the school improvement effort.
11. Is effective in building community support for the school's improvement effort.

Parent Leadership

To what extent do you agree that parents:

12. Play a key leadership role in the school improvement effort.
13. Play a leadership role in the planning stage of the school improvement effort.
14. Were encouraged to take leadership roles by school staff.
15. Took direct responsibility for implementing parent involvement initiatives.

Decision to Be Involved

To what extent do you agree that you:

16. Have an important role to play in your child(ren)'s education.
17. Should work together with school staff to help your child(ren) learn.
18. Should be involved in school improvement decision making.
19. Know how to help your child(ren) do well at school.
20. Make a significant difference in your child(ren)'s school performance.
21. Feel positive about your contribution to the school improvement effort.
22. Are asked by your child(ren) to participate in learning activities.
23. Are asked by your child(ren)'s teacher(s) to participate in learning activities with your child(ren).
24. Are asked by the principal to participate in the school improvement effort.
25. Are asked by other parents to participate in the school improvement effort.

Outcomes for Parents of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that the school improvement effort resulted in:

26. The school community working together effectively on school improvement.
27. More learning opportunities available for parents.
28. The community developing a better impression of the school.
29. Better understanding by parents of their role and responsibilities regarding their children's education.
30. More involvement by parents in student learning.
31. More involvement by parents in school decision making.

Outcomes for Students of the School Improvement Effort

To what extent do you agree that the school improvement effort resulted in:

32. Better programs for students.
33. Increased student learning.
34. Increased student enthusiasm about school.

Parent Participation at Home

To what extent do you agree that participation in school improvement influenced you to:

- 35. Create a quiet workspace for your child(ren) to do homework.
- 36. Encourage your child(ren) to read.
- 37. Help your child(ren) with homework.
- 38. Set high expectations for your child(ren)'s educational attainment.
- 39. Encourage a more positive attitude towards education in your child(ren).
- 40. Closely monitor your child(ren)'s progress at school.

Parent Participation at School

To what extent do you agree that participation in school improvement caused you to:

- 41. Assist with student learning in the classroom.
- 42. Fundraise for the school.
- 43. Participate in school decision-making groups.
- 44. Influence school improvement planning initiatives.
- 45. Advocate on behalf of your child(ren).

Demographic Information

- 1. How many adults live at your home? ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 or more
- 2. How many children live at your home? ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 or more
- 3. At what stages are your children? (Fill in as many bubbles as apply.)
☐ preschool ☐ elementary ☐ secondary ☐ other
- 4. Your highest level of education is:
☐ some high school
☐ high school completion
☐ some college or university
☐ college or university completion
☐ graduate degree
- 5. Your gender: ☐ female ☐ male
- 6. Dominate language spoken at home: ☐ English ☐ French ☐ Other

Thank you for completing this survey. Please seal it in the envelope provided and return it to the school office.