

October 20, 2006

## School Planning Councils

As a government, we have made a commitment to be the most literate jurisdiction in North America. This commitment reflects the expectations of our public, our parents, and the education community. To do this, research tells us that the active involvement of the school community is essential. Since 2002, British Columbia schools have been supported by local School Planning Councils (SPCs). Comprised of three parents, a principal, a teacher, and in some cases a student, SPCs are a key part of our system of accountability for public education.

The establishment of SPCs reflects our belief that decisions about student achievement should be made as close to students as possible. The role of the SPC is to foster involvement in school planning, to develop evidence-based decision making, and to promote engagement with the entire community including teachers. Although SPCs are at different stages of development across BC, where SPCs are well established and working effectively, we are seeing positive results for students as well as increased parent involvement in the effort. We have identified several key factors that contribute to the success of SPCs in schools. They include.

- Encouraging and welcoming attitudes that build and nurture positive relationships
- Maintaining good two-way communication and striving for consensus
- Supporting ongoing and thoughtful review of data and evidence leading to decisions for planning and action in the school and classrooms
- Maintaining a spirit of inquiry and focusing on continuous improvement

SPCs consider the diverse perspectives of the staff, students and the entire school community in their work. I believe that our teachers play a key role in this work and it is unfortunate that the BCTF direction to its members to withdraw from school planning councils interferes with the collaborative planning that is intended to occur to support student achievement.

### Are there specific examples of effective SPCs?

One SPC that comes to mind is Rayleigh Elementary in School District No. 73 (Kamloops/Thompson). This SPC provides a strong support structure for their school. As one SPC member said, "In all we do . . . the support is never-ending for the school planning initiative and goals."

At Rayleigh Elementary School, an extensive and inclusive process is used to review student results to determine goals for the school. School, district and provincial level data are organized for analysis and discussion. The process for reviewing the information includes discussion in small groups, where staff and parents have an opportunity to explore and comment on results and directions.

Although this school community is well organized to accomplish the important task of developing a school plan, it isn't all easy. To guide the work, a parent from this SPC recommends that everyone: Be approachable; Be available; Establish and maintain strong communication."

## What is thoughtful decision making?

As we discussed last week, a balanced approach to assessment is crucial to good decision-making. Like Rayleigh, schools and districts are expected to use authentic classroom assessments, district level data as well as provincial measures in their improvement efforts.

Some types of information that I know SPCs are using include early identification tools, classroom data based on the performance standards, other assessments including teacher judgment, attendance and behavioural information and school or district surveys. Data provided by the Ministry provide an additional piece to the puzzle. It is interesting to note that in discussions with schools they often comment that the local data are consistent with provincial outcomes. The use of multiple measures helps to confirm the story behind the data and provide a more complete picture of achievement.

## How does SPC work relate to the work of districts?

There is a strong link between district directions as set out by Accountability Contracts and school plans. Most districts use school plans to establish their goals and directions for the Accountability Contract. One illustration of the connection between district and school planning is in School District No. 53 (Okanagan Similkameen). After considering input from SPCs, data from the schools, the district and the Ministry, and other information, the School Board sets district priorities to support student learning. The SPCs then build their school plans to address the priorities and needs of their schools, and the district Accountability Contract is subsequently prepared to reflect the district priorities and the needs identified in the school plans. Clearly, the SPC planning processes are critical to shaping the work of the entire district.

Additionally, more than 60% of the districts in the province have developed a District Review-like process to engage with SPCs about their work. This often includes the establishment of district teams that involve: administrators, teachers, parents and trustees. These teams visit schools, review plans, and ask pertinent questions to help guide future work. Other districts provide opportunities for their SPCs to present their plans at board meetings or for meetings in the local community.

## Conclusions

This year, some district review teams found that a few schools regarded the school planning process as a compliance exercise separate from the “real” work of the school. This is not only unfortunate but unacceptable in the interest of improving success for all of our children. Fortunately, in many schools visited, school plans were viewed as living documents, serving as a road map for their improvement efforts. In these schools, it was clear that the plans were monitored and revised throughout the year as circumstances changed or as understanding of the needs of students deepened.

Improving the life chances of all of our students is a shared responsibility. When staff, parents and students in school and district communities work together, the chances for success are significantly enhanced. School Planning Councils offer an opportunity to explore the questions that can guide continuous improvement.

I am convinced that when schools and districts consistently use evidence to explore where they are, collaboratively decide where they need to go, implement the right strategies to get there, and monitor their progress, achievement will improve for all of the students in our province.