

**A Case Study of
the Magrath
School Council 1995-2000.**

by Darryl Christensen

B.Ed., University of Alberta, 1981

A Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Education
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF EDUCATION

LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA

JULY 2000

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my wife, Allyson, without whose encouragement I would have never been able to accomplish this work. I would also like to dedicate this work to my children, Adrienne, Brianne, Darin and Celine, who love so unconditionally and who bring such joy into my life. Lastly, to my parents, whose sacrifices for me I am only now beginning to understand.

ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of the Magrath School Council, Magrath, Alberta, Canada, from 1995-2000. The study examines the reasons people in Magrath give for sitting on school council. The study also examines how the school council has evolved from 1995-2000 and what the members consider their successes and failures. The results of the study provide some insight into the functioning of a school council in rural Alberta and hopefully offer some suggestions to school councils for avoiding potential problems and encouraging successes. Finally, a comparison of the work of a school council from the perspective of teachers and of parents is made. The results indicate that teachers, as council members, become very concerned when they think parent council members are using their positions on council to engage in school administration activities. Teacher members prefer a school council that works on building better communication between school and community. The studied group of parent members agree. In the beginning, parent council members had some serious misunderstandings of the work of a school council in the initial stages, coming to the task with personal agendas and activist determination. As their perceptions and their roles modified over time, the school council at Magrath has become a fairly innocuous organization, attending mainly to tasks that do not create conflict or tension with professional staff. Ironically, both parent and teacher members of the present school council are concerned about the current state of the council, worried that it lacks authority and purpose.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the work of Dr. Townsend in assisting me with this project. He has worked hard to provide me with the assistance that I needed to make this project successful and the guidance needed to help me hone in on what I needed to do. Thank you David. Your help will never be forgotten. I will always be in your debt.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
Chapter 1: Background on School Councils.....	1
Chapter 2 : Review of the Literature.....	4
History of School Councils in Alberta.....	4
Role of School Council.....	7
Developing a School Council.....	10
Role of the Principal.....	14
Role of the School Board.....	16
Shared Decision Making.....	18
Chapter 3: Methodology and Limitations of the Study.....	21
Methodology.....	21
Questions asked of the School Council Members.....	22
Limitations to the Study.....	25
Chapter 4: Findings and Results.....	26
Reasons for Becoming Council Members.....	27
Issues of Importance for School Council.....	29
The Role of School Council.....	30
School Council Successes.....	32
Doing Things Differently.....	36

Chapter 5: Problems and Issues for the Magrath School Council.....	43
The Roles of the Principal.....	44
The Current Situation.....	48
Chapter 6 : Conclusions and Recommendations.....	50
References.....	53
Appendix A Questions.....	56
Appendix B Letter of Consent.....	58

CHAPTER ONE

Background on School Councils in Alberta

Societal institutions such as education, health care and social services tend to change through demands that arise out of a need to address issues brought about by a perception that the present system is somehow not meeting expectations. These expectations reflect the values and standards held by members of a society or community at a particular point in time; as societal, economic and demographic conditions change, so does public opinion (Cuban, 1990). During the last half century, the North American public has taken contradictory positions on schools and educational processes, often leading to quite radical changes in the educational system.

For example, the late 1950's through the early 1970's were years of rapid change. The dual threat provided by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with the launch of Sputnik and Japan with its spectacular economic recovery challenged the technological edge and global market superiority enjoyed by the countries of the Western World (Fullan, 1993a; 1993b). One result was the introduction of numerous innovations in education. Open plan schools, curricular reforms, and individualized instruction were among the changes brought about as society tried to develop students prepared to enter the 1970's.

The 1990's also marked another round of changes in education. Political trends have shown a marked movement to the political right and, in turn, many of the reforms of the 1970's have been discredited. The Province of Alberta is certainly among those jurisdictions experiencing political movement to the right and the educational reforms of the last decade would give strong evidence of this. The reinstatement of standardized tests at the third, sixth, ninth and twelfth grades in 1984 was the beginning of a

movement towards greater accountability and more forceful centralization of the mechanisms of control in Alberta.

One of the results of the educational restructuring that followed centralization of funding and student evaluation has been the movement to decentralize decision making to the school level. This approach began in the United States in the latter 1980's (David, 1989, Cawelti, 1994) and was formalized in Alberta when a major provincial restructuring plan for education was announced in February, 1994, ostensibly in response to depressed economic conditions and increased pressure to address the government's ever-increasing budget deficit and accumulating debt. As a result of these and other pressures, and after a consultation process conducted in the Fall of 1993, it was established by the government that parent and community stakeholders wished to have a more meaningful role in the education of their children in the public school system (Alberta Education, 1993).

The Alberta restructuring plan reduced educational spending by 12.4% over four years and also mandated school-based management by September, 1996. Included in the school-based process was the specification of new roles for participants at all levels of the educational system. This legislated reform was contained in a "Three Year Business Plan" (Alberta Education, 1994b) and accompanied by subsequent changes to the provincial School Act. An ensuing report outlined the roles and responsibilities of all educational stakeholders and specified areas of increased involvement for teachers, students, parents and members of the community in school based program and policy decisions (Alberta Education, 1995).

This round of reforms made it mandatory for Alberta schools to form school councils. Until 1994, most schools in the province had Parent Advisory Councils (PAC's) which were either elected or appointed to advise the school administration on

matters upon which the principal and staff wanted community input. When the provincial government legislated the school councils into the School Act, however, the mandate changed and strengthened. The School Act dictated that membership on the school council should consist of parents (as would be expected) but it also included a student representative, teacher representation and a person from the community at large, in addition to the principal. In addition to this, Clause 5 of Section 17 of the School Act extended the power of the council considerably. "Subject to the regulations, a school council may [could] make and implement policies in the school that the council consider[ed] necessary to carry out its functions." It was under these guidelines that the school council was formed in Magrath School in 1995.

Magrath School is located in the town of Magrath in southern Alberta. It is part of the Westwind School Division #74. In 1995, Magrath School was a K-12 school which serviced students from the communities of Magrath, Spring Coulee, Del Bonita, (10-12) and Welling. In 2000, it is now two schools with one being Magrath Elementary, with grades from K-6 and the Junior Senior High School from 7-12. Del Bonita school has closed down in the interim and now sends students from all grades to Magrath.

The purpose of this study was to examine the Magrath School Council and compare its evolution from its inception in 1995 until the spring of 2000. The study attempted to compare and contrast past and present councils' problems and successes. It also sought to determine the causes of problems encountered by the school council and provide recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

History of School Councils in Alberta

To locate this study in an appropriate context, this literature review covers the history of school councils in Alberta. The Province of Alberta officially mandated the formation of school councils in 1995 as part of a larger site based management program. The concept of Site Based Management (S.B.M.) is closely linked to the formation of school councils and involves the restructuring of the administration of schools and of the policy making structure of education.

Site Based Management is in part a decentralization of administrative responsibility to the level of the school. The Edmonton School Based Budgeting program is an example of this. However, S.B.M. also includes the devolution of policy making to the school level. The Alberta government's proposals for S.B.M. as contained in Bill 19, while centralizing certain decisions, locate at the school level important policy making decisions concerning educational services for children.(O'Reilly, 1995, p. 7)

Therefore, with the introduction of Site Based Management as a government policy, school councils stood to gain influence as many more policy decisions were to be made at the school level.

The government of Alberta recognized the importance of involving people at a local level in decision making for schools. "Educating our young is so important to society that everyone-- government, parents, teachers, students and other community

members-- must share the responsibility by taking an active role.” (School Council Handbook, 1995, p. A2) With this edict, the government indicated that the governance of schools in the province was to include a broader base of stake holders than had previously been required. “These councils [were] designed to give parents, students, teachers, and other community members meaningful involvement in decisions that affect their schools. In addition, school based decision making [was] instituted throughout the province so decisions [could] be made as close as possible to those affected by them.” (School Council Handbook, 1995, p. .A2)

A School Council is defined as:

...a collective association of parents, teachers, principals, staff, and community representatives who work together to promote the well being, and effectiveness of all stake holders in the school community and thereby enhance student learning. A school council is a means to facilitate collaboration of all education partners in the local school. (School Council Handbook, 1995, p. .A5)

First of all, the province dictated that the make up of a school council will include all community members who have a stake in education of children attending that school. “Provincial regulations require that parents comprise the majority of the school council. The rest of the council is to include the school principal, at least one teacher, at least one community representative, and , in high schools, at least one student.” (School Council Handbook, 1995, p. A3)

Robertson and Briggs (1994) support the government’s initiative to share decision making.

It is imperative that leaders at the school (not only the principal

but other individuals who exert formal or informal leadership) insure that all constituents have an opportunity to provide input into and exert influence on school level decisions, especially those decisions most relevant to the particular constituents. Individuals holding formal leadership positions should receive valid feedback regarding constituents' satisfaction with their opportunities to be involved. In addition, appropriate decision making structures should be designed that will help overcome the competition among the existing internal factions and the lack of participation by those apathetic about the reform effort. (p. 24)

The announcement, however, was not greeted by all with enthusiasm. Elliot (1994) had the following comment:

The minister's March 31 announcement of the amendments explains the new role: The legislation and subsequent regulations will create a new school based management system and define the makeup of school councils. The school based model will see the principal, professional staff, parents, and community members assume more authority in the nature of programs offered at the school, the expenditure of monies, and the day to day management of the school. Alberta Education's three year business plan, released in February, indicated that a school council would be involved in establishing a school based management system, developing 'school plans, policies, budgets' and establishing the "scope of the school program and extra curricular activities."

Judging by its restructuring, the government must believe that

parents possess a special knowledge about education and education administration that educators and education administrators lack. (p. 8)

Role of School Council

One of the most important challenges in the development of successful school councils is for its initial members to determine the role of the school council and to outline its responsibilities. Gleadow (1991) points out the dilemma that the government faced when attempting to determine the limits of power for the school councils in the province.

There was considerable precedent and inclination to develop a carefully prescribed, district-wide set of regulations and policies for Parent Advisory Groups. Part of the pressure to be prescriptive came from the concern about how much control parents would have and want in the system. (p.11)

But as Goodlad (1984) has reported, “Polls and surveys show that [parents] would like a greater say in the affairs of their schools. But this does not mean that parents want to take over the schools. Rather they want to be kept informed in as clear a fashion as possible” (p. 273).

Hoffman (1999) echoes this sentiment. He notes:

...I want to be involved, but that kind of involvement is a big responsibility for a volunteer. That essentially sums up the attitude of most parents involved in parent councils. As Maria Mendicino, chair at St. Pius X school in Toronto says “I want to have a working relationship with the principal and teachers who work with my children, but I don’t want to run the school.” (p. 44)

Indeed, Hoffman contends that the governments mandating school councils are slow to hear the parents' opinions on the subject. He asserts:

... there's a major gap between the role policy makers have in mind for parents and what parents have in mind themselves. Politicians see parental involvement as the key to improving accountability in education. To them that means decision making power, and they think parents want it. They're wrong, but the message has been slow to get through. (p. 44)

When the Alberta government finally legislated the role of school councils into the School Act, the functions were laid out in Section 17 (4), which states:

A school council may, at its discretion;

- (a) advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school,
 - (b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board in accordance with the delegation,
 - (c) consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the minister,
 - (d) do anything it is authorized under the regulations to do.
 - (e) consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent, and
- (5) Subject to the regulations, a school council may make and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its

functions.

The issue of what school councils are to do is also set out in the handbook.

...school councils may choose to become involved in decisions that set direction for the school, establishing a mission statement, a vision statement, guiding principles and objectives. The school council may develop strategies for achieving these objectives. Each school council will determine its own level of involvement. (p. A3)

The functions and responsibilities of the school councils were thus left to the discretion of the school boards and the school councils themselves. This, while it was intended to provide the freedom for schools to develop their own site based management models, also provides the opportunity for conflict, as Peterson Del-Mar (1994) states:

School councils run counter to some deep traditions. Munson observes that “naturally people want to look at someone and say ‘ What are we going to do?’” Site councils are based on a belief that there is no single source of authority; it forces people accustomed to simply following directions to look within themselves and dialogue with others for answers.

This can be frightening. Teachers may also resent committing time to administrative duties that used to fall to the principal. (p.10)

In addition, Peterson Del- Mar (1994) contends:

It matters less where a given district or school draws the boundaries of power wielded by various groups and individuals than that those boundaries are clear and widely understood. School councils must avoid the extreme; overstepping their boundaries. Most school councils do not

have authority from their district to pluck decisions out of the superintendent's hands. (p. 9)

In comparison, Kentucky provides what would appear to be a more powerful function to school councils than does Alberta. According to Feng (1997):

Kentucky law prescribes a list of functions (missions) to school councils: make decisions on curriculum and schedule, the use of school space, instructional practices and discipline issues, the assignment of instructional and non instructional staff time, the assignment of students to classes and programs, etc. School councils also have a more general policy making role to set school policies consistent with district board policy, state, and federal laws and regulations. In summary, school councils function include three general areas: instruction, administration and personnel. (p. 4)

Developing a School Council

Having established the parameters within which a school council must operate, its members must then develop a functioning school council. This can be a difficult task and one which requires a great deal of thought.

Developing a school council is a complex process. It requires parent interest, student involvement, teacher commitment, and administrative skill. The key to its successful development rests with the parents, teachers, students and administrators of each school. Parents have a right to participate in the education of their child. Students need to take responsibility for their learning. Teachers must create the best possible environment for learning. Administrators must take responsibility for drawing on the strengths of the team in order to build a strong partnership.

(Collins and Lahe, 1996, p. 4)

Feng (1997) identifies three challenges that principals face when implementing site based decision making.

1. Developing a clear shared educational vision; 2. Developing effective decision making and governance processes; and 3. Building well functioning teams. These findings suggest that implementing the site based decision making program can be a real challenging task for any school. (p. 6)

The importance of the decision making process seems to be paramount in any discussion of site based management and, similarly, in an understanding of the role of school councils.

A school's ability to effectively identify, design, and implement valuable strategic and operational changes will depend to a large extent on the quality of the decision making processes utilized at the school. There is, of course, no guarantee that these decision processes will operate effectively, especially if those involved are not provided adequate training in such areas as decision making techniques and group process. If decision making is ineffective, it is unlikely that the school will implement many meaningful changes and thus that S.B.M. will generate much in the way of school improvement. If, however, decision making is truly based on participative, collaborative approach in which members can influence decisions, there is mutual trust and respect among members, communication is open, and problems are resolved effectively, the school is likely to implement changes that will enhance its functioning(Peterson

and Briggs, 1994, p. 6).

It is equally apparent that the best structure for the decision making model should be one through which the decisions are shared or balanced. Kannapel (1994), in describing a case study of one district's experience with the formation of school councils, points out:

The school with the most balanced decision making model, got off to a rocky start two years ago. The district had a history of strong parent involvement. Some teachers feared that parents would try to dominate the council. Council members reported that teacher council members virtually voted as a bloc, motives were suspect and one parent and one teacher constantly disagreed...At meetings observed the first two years, the principal facilitated but did not dominate, council discussions. Parent and teacher council members were outspoken. Council members talked through issues until they reached consensus, then voted on motions that were formally moved and seconded. Almost all votes were unanimous. Ample opportunity was provided for all council members to speak on issues, and observations suggest that all members felt free to contribute to discussions and usually did. (p. 6)

Kannapel, as quoted above, writes about the distrust that may occur at the outset of school council organization. The importance of all members working together to accomplish a common goal cannot be underestimated if the school council is to be successful. This is echoed by Robertson and Briggs (1994):

An important implication, therefore, is that school leaders should take an active role in making sure that school based decision making is guided by a vision and related values regarding desirable outcomes, ideally those which are student centered. Not only does this entail providing a vision at every opportunity and taking steps to insure that all participants become committed to achieving it. For example, one principal commented, “If anyone spends five minutes with me, they should know where I’m coming from.” Furthermore, leaders need to help others translate the vision and values into concrete actions and specific decisions regarding how to improve the school. (p. 27)

The Canadian School Boards Association Handbook (1995) also expresses some concern over the idea that school council members may each come with their own agenda.

Alberta education writer and consultant, Olive Elliot, says most Albertans want children to have an excellent education, and some are even willing to work to that end. The trouble is that they frequently disagree on what constitutes a good education and how to provide it. “It takes more than good will to prevent decision making from degenerating into a cat fight among the competing and conflicting interests,” she notes, “There has to be an arbiter: somebody to maintain a balance. Once, such a body existed. It was called a school board.” (p.22)

Littlewood, Jantzen and Steinbach (1998) emphasize the importance of having clear goals and of having people put aside their own goals for the good of the school.

To work well, councils seem to require clear and unambiguous indications of their purposes and the roles of individual members, especially parents. In a more exaggerated form than a corporate team, council members have very different backgrounds and potentially disparate and conflicting agendas. This helps explain why power struggles and political conflict are the most frequently cited obstacles to councils effectiveness. (p. 8)

Benson (1998) reports something similar in her discussion with a P.A.C. member, who states, “The whole system is there for all the kids and if you join a P.A.C. you assume the responsibility for the other children in the system, too” (p. 3).

Role of the Principal

The role of the principal is critical to any discussion about the development and use of school councils as a resource for the school. The principal is probably the person who stands to be both the most threatened and the most aided by a school council. The creation of a school council poses a risk for a principal as the possibility exists that he or she could lose some power and control. This is discussed by many different authors.

Bergman (1992) shows the trepidation that many principals may feel:

I was a bit worried. Isn't site based management most often recommended for troubled schools that require major restructuring? My own leadership style can best be characterized as organized and responsive. I had made countless arrangements to ensure that the school ran smoothly and on an even keel...As my experience with site based management unfolded, however, I found that I needed to learn to let go and provide the means for people to solve their own problems. (p. 48)

Levin (1995) points out another reason why principals may have been hesitant to become involved with school councils. He notes:

Whichever way things go, principals will have to ‘manage’ the councils along with all their other management responsibilities, which means that they will have less time to devote to program and staff development in their schools. Based on past experience, “managing” the diversity of agendas and interests that will be represented on these councils will not be a piece of cake. It will certainly test the mettle of the majority of principals who have rarely, if ever, had to do this before; they will need all the help they can get. (p. 27)

The school council also must rely upon the principal if it is to function effectively.

School councils will find it very difficult to function effectively if principals do not want to work with them. Many council members, after all, are under the principal’s authority. She or he exercises considerable control over their salary, even their actual employment. Principals are also privy to a lot of information that site councils require to function effectively. Widespread support of a school site council by teachers and classified staff greatly enhances its chances of success. But a principal’s commitment to shared decision making is essential to its success.

(Peterson Del-Mar ,1994, p. 9)

The means by which this change in decision making can occur is also important for the principal to recognize. The principal must be prepared to become a facilitator, rather than a controller. Alkire (1993) writes, “A principal quickly learns that if any change is to occur, it must be done through influence, not control. Change occurs through an understanding of the culture of the school and an adoption of leadership behaviors that include supporting, directing, delegating, and coaching”. (p. 27).

Alkire goes on to state some of the components required if the principal is to develop a shared leadership model.

- Learn to trust: You must be able to trust yourself, as well as those you empower.
- Serve as facilitator: The principal is a leader, not a controller, and facilitates people and processes.
- View teachers and other support staff including instructional aides as colleagues.

Help people feel important by working with them and not making them feel as if they work under you. (p. 30)

Role of the School Board

In addition to the parents and school based personnel on school council, the school board also has a responsibility to assist the members of school councils to do their job effectively. Its function should be to provide funding for school councils to access in-service education for members of school council, whether they be parents, teachers, administrators, students, or community members. The Canadian School Boards Association Handbook (1995) states:

In order to achieve their goals, school councils will need at least minimal

funding. Many of their members will require training in the basics of governance, management, educational policy and finance, and community consultation. In systems where parental involvement has been limited, teachers, principals and superintendents may also benefit from in service training. (p.18)

There is no reason to believe that this in-service should discontinue at any point. As time passes, so the membership of a school council will change. Therefore, it is necessary for in- service programs to be on going. “School boards can advance their own agendas, while building trust and common ground with what may amount to a new level of local government, by helping school councils assemble the information and strategic advice that they need to do a good job.” (Canadian School Boards Association Handbook, p.24)

Whenever parents have a choice, they will send their children to schools in which they have the most confidence. An excellent way to promote parent confidence is to allow the parents access to the decision making processes in the school. As parents become involved in creating a vision and developing a mission statement for their school, they are much more likely to see themselves as a more important part of the larger school community.

Noble (1995), captures some of this potential for parent enthusiasm in the following comment by a parent:

It has been a wonderful learning experience for all of us on the school growth committee. I am looking forward to the students’ involvement in this group. I believe they will add a very positive dimension to our work.

The Clara Benton School family mission statement remains the same, regardless of what structures and demands are imposed upon us by legislation and the political powers that be. We continue to work together towards our vision of what schooling should be for our learners. And this will not change. (p. 5)

Shared Decision Making

The research regarding the effectiveness of school councils and the uses of a shared decision making model seems to indicate that the process, while requiring risk and a change in style, is worthwhile once achieved. Many of those who have been successful in involving their school councils in the decision making processes of the school speak of their successes with missionary zeal.

Collins and Lahe (1996) state:

Our school council has benefited the school in many ways. It has provided a forum for parents, teachers, students, and administrators to dialogue about issues of importance on behalf of the whole school. By sharing information and collaborating on decisions for the good of the school, a strong relationship has been established between the home and the school. This strong working alliance has developed into a trust relationship which forms the basis for all dialogue about school issues. (p. 19)

According to Peterson Del-Mar (1994):

The importance of parental involvement is that members of site councils often comment that the organizations help them feel like a more integral

part of their school. Site councils not only take the pressure off principals for making some tough decisions, they also enhance the likelihood of a good decision being reached. If several heads are better than one, then effective groups should create more useful decisions than isolated individuals. (p. 6)

Peterson Del-Mar sees three distinct advantages to a shared decision making model involving school councils. “ The three major advantages of participatory decision making are higher quality decisions, higher employee satisfaction, and improved relations between staff and management. These are substantial and powerful advantages.” (p. 5)

Bergman (1992) states that:

...decisions may be a little slower in coming but they will be more enduring... as principals wend their way through the many passages of site based management, there will be moments of frustration and confusion...but take it from one who has been there. Any perceived drawbacks pale in comparison to the substantial benefits of the approach.

(p. 51)

In conclusion, then, the literature regarding the formation of school councils and their role in the decision making processes of schools seems generally to support the idea their innovations can help improve schools. There are, however, some important elements and structures that should be in place to facilitate success. First, it is essential that the responsibilities of the school council be clearly outlined and understood by all members. Second, it is important to have the members of the school council share in the creation of the goals of the council and its mission, which should be related to school improvement and student achievement. Third, the principal must strive to involve all in

the decision making process, thereby certainly giving up some of his or her autonomy.

Fourth, the school board must be willing to provide the school council with support and in-service training to help members better understand their role and carry it out more effectively. This in-service should be ongoing and the support of the school board will almost certainly require financial resources. Finally, schools that are able to develop effective school councils are much more likely to make decisions that can gain the support of most of the people who will be affected by them. This ownership of decision making should result in a better school environment and better community attitudes towards the changes needed to improve schools.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology and Limitations

The purpose of this study was to examine the Magrath School Council and compare its evolution from its inception in 1995 until the spring of 2000. In which ways did the Magrath School reflect what was happening in the literature? Did Magrath have the same challenges as the research indicated was happening elsewhere? In this sense, it was hoped the Magrath School Council would provide additional information in an important area of school governance.

Methodology

Data was collected through a combination of questionnaires and interviews with members of school councils, past and present, as well as through examination of the minutes of the school council since the inception of the Magrath School Council in 1995 and ending in 2000. All respondents were given a copy of the questions that guided the study, and were asked to respond in writing. As written responses were returned, they were collected and sorted according to whether they were prepared by students, staff or parents. Following receipt of the responses, some respondents were then contacted and interviewed, either for clarification of what they had written or for further elaboration of what they saw as the key issues.

During the information gathering process, I wrote what I felt was the most important information gained from those I interviewed. I then verified what I had written with each individual before including it as data for the study. I have also kept on file all of the written responses received.

Not all of the responses have been used for each question that guided the inquiry, only those that seemed to reveal something new, or restate something in a clearer manner.

As data analysis progressed, it became obvious that some of the questions elicited more revealing responses than others. In several cases, the group membership of particular respondents was of some importance to the research. The role of a staff member, for example, on school council, need not be, but often is, different from that of a parent. Also, the opinions of parents and those of teachers were frequently quite different and these differences became apparent at critical times. Finally, the responses of the principal were recorded and discussed in a section of their own because they were so distinct. They added credibility to the idea that the attitude and behavior of the school principal is of primary importance in determining the success of the organization and function of the school councils.

The questionnaire was sent out to 21 people who had served on the school council over the period in time from 1995-2000. The names included parents, community members, students and staff members. Of those who received the questions in written form, 15 chose to participate through answering the questions. None of the community members responded, nor did the students. All of the teachers chose to respond and only 3 parent representatives did not respond to my questions in written form.

Of those on the initial school council before the school divided in 1996, I received responses from 5 parents, the principal and both teacher representatives. Of those who currently serve, I received responses from the all but 6 parents, the principal and both teacher representatives. Of those who were involved in the inaugural Magrath School Council in 1995, one remained a member in 2000 and I did receive a response from that person.

Questions asked of the school council members

The following questions were given to each member who chose to participate in

the study. The rationale as to why these questions were chosen is included under each question.

1. What were some of the main reasons why you let your name stand to be on the Magrath School Council?

The reasons why someone might want to serve on school council are important since they may help explain the member's level of interest in or knowledge of various issues.

2. What did/do you see as the 3-4 most important functions of a school council in Alberta?

This question was one of particular interest to me since, while a member of staff, and also president of the Westwind Local of the Alberta Teachers Association, I had the opportunity to hear about some of the power struggles that occurred at the inception of the Magrath School Council. There were some major disagreements over the powers given to school councils as outlined by the legislation in the School Act.

3. What did/do you consider to be the most valuable contributions you (have) made in your role as a school council member?

This question was designed to determine if there was a change over time in terms of what the council was doing and what members considered important.

4. What do you consider the greatest success your school council achieved during your time as a member?

This was considered important as a way to discover some things that were thought to be successes by some members. It allowed people to respond from their different perspectives as either parents, students, administrators, or teachers.

5. If you could change anything about your time on school council, what would it be?

This question was asked to determine if and by what degree people's opinions and feelings changed over time.

6. Do you believe that the members of the school council worked collaboratively during your time on it?

This question was asked to provide insight into school council members' perceptions of the quality of working relationships that existed on the various school councils. Were there changes in perception over time? Did each council operate effectively and if not, why not?

7. What would make Alberta school councils more effective, in your opinion?

This question was topical considering the policy changes being planned by Alberta Learning and the Ministry's recent report on the operations of school councils.

8. Do you have any other opinions or ideas about this or other school councils that you would like to have recorded in this study?

This allowed the respondents to ponder their time and provide some input that they may not have felt fit into the other questions asked.

From February 28 to March 24, the members of Magrath school councils, past and present, were contacted and given the interview questions. The following people responded in writing to the questions: Arlen Bennet, Catherine Pilling, Lorraine Balderson, Dr. Neil Nordquist, Robert Nelson, Mike Schneyder, Ilona Schneyder, Kris Alston, Edward Holland, Sherry Karren, Devar Dahl, Dr. Steven Johnson, Sandra Smith, Robert Henderson, and Russell Rollingson. In addition to this, Ross Blackmer was also interviewed regarding specific incidents but was not given the other questions because he did not serve as a member of school council but, as a staff member, was affected by the

decisions made by council. Of those who responded, the following people were also interviewed for further information and clarification as to what they had written: Dr. Neil Nordquist, Robert Nelson, Russell Rollingson, Devar Dahl, Sherry Karren, and Robert Henderson.

In addition to the questions and interviews, the minutes of the Magrath School Council and the Magrath Junior/ Senior School Council were examined as sources of additional information regarding topics that seemed to be of particular interest.

Limitations to the study

Each school is different and each set of circumstances is similarly different for each school. I recognize that the findings generated from this study of Magrath School Council should not be generalized to other schools in other jurisdictions. On the other hand, the information gathered through the responses clearly demonstrates that the experiences of the school council in Magrath is reflective and indicative of what is said to be happening in many other places in the nation, and in other parts of the world.

It should be pointed out that in 1996, what had been one school from K-12 split into two schools, K-6 and 7-12. I conducted interviews with the members of the original school council but not with people who have been elementary school council members since the split. This study focused primarily on the functioning of the secondary school council and, therefore, the findings reflect the experience of the secondary school since 1996, and not those of the elementary school.

Lastly, it should be noted that despite attempts to interview and contact each member of the school council, all were not interviewed, nor did all respond to the questionnaire. It is impossible to know how these few might have changed the study. I have proceeded on the assumption that enough people from different time periods did

respond to the questions asked to be confident that the conclusions are valid.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings and Results

The history of the Magrath School Council, as it is revealed in this brief study, provides some interesting insights regarding the formation and function of school councils. Where appropriate, background information will be provided in order to provide the reader with the specifics regarding the key issues faced by the various councils. A discussion of some of the responses to each of the questions that guided the inquiry will be presented.

What follows is a summary of responses for each of the questions posed to the members of the Magrath School Council.

Reasons for Becoming Council Members

In Magrath, members offered a variety of reasons for putting their names forward for school council. Obviously, teaching staff became a part of school council for different reasons than did parents or community representatives. One staff member stated, “I was new in the school and I saw the School Council as a way to become immediately involved in the school and the community.”

Another staff member simply said, “I thought it would be interesting.” On the other hand, some staff joined school council in order to provide a stronger voice for teachers. This happened particularly during the time of the splitting of the school into the elementary and secondary schools. One staff member stated, “I joined the school council because I believed that there were some parents who were running roughshod over the administration and were going beyond the boundaries set out by the School Act. I felt that I had a strong enough personality to state the opinion of the staff in support of the administration and to reign in those on school council who were seen as destructive to the

school by the administration.” This particular statement expresses well the combative atmosphere which existed early in the organization of the school council.

Parents seem to have joined the school council for two basic reasons. The first was the desire to contribute to the betterment of the school community as a whole. Typical of these parents was one who said, “I was concerned and interested in the goings on of Magrath Junior Senior High School. Sometimes you get the feeling that parents don’t really care about what is happening by the turnouts at the General Meetings.”

Another parent echoed this sentiment, stating, “I need to know what’s going on in school. I enjoy helping out wherever possible. I try to make Magrath School even better.” A third parent said, “I have three children in the Junior Senior High School. I feel it is very important to be involved in their education.”

Another parent said he got involved because, “I felt it was important to have input from parents and since many of our children were in school at that time that I should be involved. I had previously served on the P.A.C. for many years and felt that the views of parents were usually overlooked in favor of those of the administration. I welcomed the new legislation regarding school councils.”

The second reason that parents in Magrath chose to sit on the school council was in order to promote or ensure the continuation of a particular program that they felt important. Those who felt this way made statements similar to the following: “Career and technology studies were being introduced into Alberta schools. I wanted to be sure that our academic subjects did not suffer in Magrath. I had six children in the school, ranging from kindergarten to high school and so I thought I could represent parents in the whole school.”

In conclusion, the parental involvement in Magrath School Council seems to have

been in accordance with the expectations of the Province of Alberta as laid out in the School Council Handbook. The people seemed to want to be involved to help the school provide a learning experience for their children which would be positive and reflect the values of the community.

Issues of Importance for School Council

As discussed in the review of the literature, descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of school councils were left fairly general. However, as the literature points out, the school councils were supposed to have had limits of power and responsibilities clearly laid out. Since the government did not do so, and the Westwinds school board also did not make those limits and responsibilities clear, problems arose early in Magrath.

The interpretation of the Clause 5 of Section 17 of the School Act became a source of tension for some time between the administration and the school council. This clause states that “Subject to the regulations, a school council may make and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its functions.”

The minutes of those early school council meetings to indicate that this became a point of issue in the very beginning of the school council’s organization. On February 28,1996, the superintendent attended the school council meeting in order to “ discuss the roles and responsibilities of school councils.” Reference is also made in the minutes of April 24,1996 to “a meeting with staff regarding the misunderstanding of tape recorders being brought into classrooms.”¹ This elicited a quick response from the

¹ The meeting with staff was held with some members of school council and all staff of the school because supposedly there was a statement made in a school council meeting that tape recorders should be brought into the classrooms to be able to document that some teachers were not acting professionally.

superintendent. A letter to the school council dated March 20, 1996 from the superintendent of schools for Westwind Regional Division discusses the issue of teacher performance as a school council concern. It said, "It is clear after reviewing the available information that the discussion of teacher performance by a school council and the possible consequence of such an action is not spelled out in one single document or act and guidelines are either vague or nonexistent....For the reasons stated above it is my opinion that school councils should avoid the discussion of an individual teacher's performance at a council meeting."

The minutes of the March 21 meeting, however, indicate that whereas the issue of school council discussing staff may have been clarified somewhat with the letter from the superintendent, it did not solve the underlying issue of power and the role of the school council. An entry notes, "Discussed the legal limits of the School Council regarding procedures for resolving school problems. Nothing resolved."

The issue of the limits of power for school councils must still not have been resolved by June, because included in the minutes of the June, 1996 meeting is a letter from the office of Pearl Gregor from Alberta Education, which points out that the role of school council was to be "advisory and consultative to the board and the school principal."

The Role of School Council

Interestingly enough, however, when interviewed, no one on school council considered the role of school council to be much beyond the vision described by original provincial documents. Each response, whether it was from teachers, parents, administrators, or community representatives, stated somewhere that the major function of school council was to improve communication. "School council needs to help inform

all parents of what is happening at the school. Communication is a major function,” stated one parent.

“The major role of school councils is to inform themselves and the community on issues that concern students and their families” was the response of another parent, who continued,”and to be a voice for parents”.

A longstanding member of school council considered “parent teacher communication” to be the most important function of school council.

Another parent wrote, “I wanted to provide an outside opinion on issues brought to school council. That of a non teacher, not employed in the system.”

Teachers were equally positive in their view of the school council as an important vehicle for communication. One teacher stated, “Schools can receive input from parents when making important decisions. Both staff and parents share in the decision making process.”

“School councils provide a direct means of communication between the school and parents, which always translates into a better climate in the school and community. Our council is terrific in providing activities (pancake breakfast) and support (chaperones) for our school,” added another staff member.

“It creates or allows closer ties between parents and teachers. There is better communication and less fear and animosity,” concluded a third representative of staff who had served on school council.

A parent from the original school council best summarized the beliefs of many of those who were interviewed in the following way:

Parents need to be involved in decisions of the school. School council is a format for that to happen. School Council needs to help inform all parents

of what is happening at the school. Communication is a major function.

School Council members can be a liaison or advocate for individual parents who are reluctant to approach the administration or teachers directly.

School council can gather information and resources to aid decisions but also to accomplish projects.

According to the respondents in this study, there was unanimity among teachers and parents that the primary function of the school council was to help with communication between the school and the community.

School Council Successes

When members sampled were asked what they considered the greatest success school council achieved during their time as a member, the responses varied according to when the respondent had served on council. The earlier members saw the organization of the council and setting up the by-laws as their major success, whereas the people who served later were more diverse in their responses. This was a sentiment shared by both the parents and teachers who served on the initial council. "I was on the school council for its first year. During this time the by-laws that govern the school council were established." was the response of one teacher. Parents echoed the statement of the teacher. "Drawing up the by-laws and the charter," was the simple response of one parent.

With respect to what was probably the most critical issue the Magrath school councils had to face, many parents considered the division of the school to be a major success. Conversely, for most teachers, this was a more divisive issue that generated far greater negative responses. Among the teachers who served on school council only one,

an elementary staff representative, considered this to be a very positive move.

For those involved at the beginning of the study, then, there were clear differences between staff members' responses and those of parents when people were asked what they thought their successes were. The issue of the division of the school was very controversial and involved the school council directly in the politics of school district administration. The school council was involved from an early stage in the hearings regarding the division of the school into an elementary and secondary school. The school council minutes of February 28, 1996 make the first reference to the issue. "Westwinds school superintendent discussed the role and responsibilities of school councils. Also presented the procedure for determining whether Magrath School should be one or two schools."

The issue was next mentioned in the April minutes. "One or two Magrath Schools? -the superintendent is meeting with the principal on April 29 to discuss this issue."

One parent who considered the division of the schools to be the most important success during her time on school council offered this comment: "I believe that dividing the school into elementary and secondary schools was the most important function that we did. This was not solely due to school council, I know, but it was a very good move, which we supported."

"Helping with the school board's decision to have separate administration for elementary and secondary schools was what I consider to be the most important thing," was the response of another parent member of the inaugural school council.

When the board first broached the subject of dividing the school, it would be fair to say that the move was by and large accepted by the elementary teachers who felt "as if

their concerns were always secondary to those of the junior and senior high schools.” On the other hand, many junior and senior high school teachers felt quite the opposite. They felt that dividing the school would reduce the resources and flexibility that having a larger staff had given them. Teachers from both sides made appointments to discuss the issue with the superintendent during the hearing process.

Many members of school council also met with the superintendent in order to present their points of view. It became apparent after these discussions that most parents in the Magrath community were in favor of the division of the school into secondary and primary schools. In effect, the will of the parents was actually very well-represented by school council members, one of whom reported, “ I believe that, while school council did not have an official position on the issue [of division of the schools], it would be fair to say that most of the members of school council were in favor of it. I also believe that most made presentations to the board saying so.”

The May minutes of the Magrath School Council indicate that the board of Westwinds Regional Division proposed that the school “should be separated into two schools with shared facilities and responsibilities for a one year trial beginning September 3, 1996”. This motion was subject to the approval from the Magrath School Council. The Magrath School Council carried that motion.

Among the more recent members of school council, the most frequent response to the question of success was the welcome back breakfast. For the last three years the school council has organized a welcome back breakfast for the students sometime during the first week of school. The breakfast has been a big success from the staff and administration point of view as well. The parents of school council gather donations from the community and the staff and school council members cook and serve up pancakes and

juice. The staff, parents, and students all enjoy each other's company and it has proven to be a nice way to start out the year.

Other more recent members identified different things as their greatest successes. One wrote, "friendships, the ability to get along and solve any problems or issues that are brought to us". Another indicated that, "Better communication with the teachers is the best thing that council has done. I also believe that being able to bring concerns to the school would be another".

After comparing the work of the early school council to the work undertaken by more recent councils, I came to the conclusion that in function and purpose the Magrath school council has evolved considerably. Council minutes are the most revealing indication of this. The minutes of the April, 1996 meeting of school council run to three pages and contain three bullets of business arising from the minutes, and a full page of committee reports (ranging from the athletics committee requesting more parental say in the goings on of extracurricular activities, to elementary concerns for garbage cans, and the need for better communication between school and home). The school council also debated whether lunch hour should be shortened and passed another motion "to support a half day of professional development for staff." The meeting was called to order at 7:30 and adjourned at 10:30.

The minutes of the April, 1999 school council meeting are somewhat more abbreviated. The minutes are one page long. The longest committee report is three lines long (compared to twenty lines in 1996 for elementary concerns). The most contentious issue is the TAG (Teacher Advisory Group) program. One question was raised, asking whether "this program is really serving the need it was set up for?" The question was referred to staff at the next staff meeting.

The meeting began at 6:30 and adjourned at 7:45.

To imply that the current council does not discuss important issues would not be correct. For example, the current council is coming up with a policy to help reduce vandalism in the school and has also discussed some very real and pressing concerns over the last years. However, the volume of the minutes from 1996 to 2000 is very different as are, one would suppose, the meetings themselves.

In conclusion, it would be fair to say that what current Magrath school council members see as successes have changed, as has the council. This is not unexpected. Whereas early on the council was charged with the responsibility of organizing and establishing a decision making body, from defining limits to establishing committees in order to make it work, the council now is much less action-oriented. Over time, the role of the school council has also become more refined as there have been some members who have served since its inception and others who have come and gone. The school council has become an accepted part of the school culture for administration, parents, and staff.

Doing Things Differently

The question regarding what one would change about one's time on school council (once again elicited responses largely dependent upon the dates during which people served. The people who served at the council's inception often mentioned the conflict and tension that surrounded their early efforts, whereas those who are currently serving most often expressed the concern that the meetings tend to be unproductive as they have become more social in nature. There seems to be little disagreement between staff and parents on this point. The school council members involved in the organization of the school council, which dealt with the issues of power and the division of the school, speak often of dissension when they reflect on things they might have done differently. Said

one, “ I would have been more patient with change. I feel we tried to move too fast on some issues and feelings were created between council and staff that I still feel exist.”

This parent expressed the concern, common to several others, that the impact of the actions of the first school council may have ramifications even today, some five years later. Certainly the decision made to divide the school has had continuing impact, but whether or not there remain ill feelings between the staff and the members of school council is much more difficult to ascertain.

Another parent, in reflecting on the way things had been done by different councils, brought up an interesting comment about a disagreement that the school council had had with the athletics council of the school. She still had feelings about, “The underlying tone that one group is going to control the other, or the feeling that one particular part of council needs to be controlled by one party. For example, parent versus school or athletics.” Disputes between the athletics council and the school council were among the most contentious issues of power that had to be resolved in the early years of the school council. Traditionally, the athletics council of Magrath School was composed of a group of teachers (coaches) and administrators who met on an irregular basis to discuss various issues related to the extracurricular programs of the school. An issue such as whether to let the ninth graders play on the junior varsity high school teams would be an example of a decision made by this council. Most of the basic day to day decisions were made by the athletic director. When the school council first organized, however, they set up an athletics committee, an indication of the kind of agendas some members brought to their initial council service. The April, 1996 meeting minutes state:

Athletics committee met with the school athletic committee and discussed changes that the School Council would like to see regarding athletics,

specifically, representation of parents on a joint athletic committee. It was decided that the athletic committee would be comprised of four staff members (principal, athletic director, boys' representative, and girls' representative) and four parents. The parents would also like to propose that a neutral arbitrator from the community be added to the athletic committee that would only vote to break ties. Concern was expressed over the burden of being both a school athletic director and coaching a major sport. The parents would also like to propose that individuals apply for coaching positions. The athletic committees's goal is to revise the school athletic handbook via negotiation before the next school council meeting.

The school council's involvement in athletics became a major issue for the staff of the Magrath School. The coaches and staff members of the athletic council were offended. Among them, the general sentiment was, "we volunteer our time to coach and work with the students of the school and this is the thanks we get." The staff clearly saw this as an indictment of the work they had done with athletics.

The parents on school council, on the other hand, were equally sure that they wanted to be involved in decision making with respect to athletics. They wanted some say as to who was to be coaching their children and they wanted some say as to how things were going to be run. As one member stated, "We wanted some say as to how the athletics in our school were being run, and we had strong feelings about the athletics committee."

The formation of the Athletics Committee on school council was not, however, without other fallout. The school athletic director resigned his position, claiming that, "if

they didn't like the way I was doing it, then they could find someone else. Didn't they realize that we volunteer our time." The issue for many of the coaches at the time was also that school council wanted to "make all of the decisions but not have to do any of the work to carry them out."

Eventually, a committee was struck, made up just as the school council had proposed. The committee drew up a handbook on the comportment of coaches and players, and some policies. The committee put in place a means to advertise for coaches to fill positions in the athletics department. That was then. Now, however, and for the last two years, coaching positions have not been advertised; nor does the athletics committee meet regularly to discuss athletics. In other words, the athletics program simply is run now as it was before the first school council was organized. Only the school staff meets to discuss athletics and these meetings are held in a much less formal manner. The school administration will call coaches together and discuss the directions that they should follow, or solicit opinions regarding the issue of the day. The function of the athletics committee of school council has become one of providing assistance in the concession, or supervision on days that staff members are unable to do so themselves, or need additional help due to the nature of the activity.

Another issue reflected upon by members of school council concerned the band program and, more specifically, the "Spirit of Alberta Marching Band." The marching band, or "Spirit", as it is affectionately called by the people of Magrath, is one of the community's proudest institutions. Started in the late 1960's, it has competed on numerous occasions in the United States, has performed in countless parades from Calgary to San Diego, and provides a full third of the school population with the marching band experience. Spirit of Alberta Marching Band is run by the band director, who is

greatly assisted by a group of hand-picked supporters called the band boosters, whose function is to fund-raise the incredible amounts of money required to send the band to various competitions.

One parent, in noting what he would have done differently, stated “I might try harder to include Spirit of Alberta in school council. I think school council could be a strong resource and advocate for the band program. Apparently (the band teacher) did not want to lose any autonomy and wanted no part of school council.”

This parent’s perceptions were probably correct. Within two years of school council’s organization, the Spirit of Alberta had come to have an “arms-length association with the school.” This ensured, to the band director’s satisfaction, that Spirit would not come under the auspices of the school council. The school no longer underwrites the program financially and, although it is supported by the administration, they run themselves largely independent of the school. Even fund raising such as the selling of calendars does not operate out of the school administration offices.

Clearly, the perceptions of a majority of staff at the time of the organization of the school council were that the school council was going to take over all of the teachers’ autonomy and intrude into their domain. The teachers were not comfortable with this and reacted accordingly. One of the teachers, when asked if there were things he would do differently commented, “I wouldn’t sit on school council again. It was way too stressful. I was often put between a rock and a hard place when there were disagreements.”

In comparison with original council members, current members of school council tend to be less responsive when asked what they would change. One person responded that (she couldn't think of anything that she would change. A second member said, “While I have enjoyed my time on school council, I sometimes wonder if the council is as

effective as it could be. I would like to see more parental involvement and a greater focus on things that would improve the education we offer each child.”

This statement is similar to those made by several other members. They wish there was more parental involvement in school council now. This seems ironic since, when the council was organized, there were plenty of parents who wanted some real say, and the result was conflict and difficulty.

One parent expressed some dissatisfaction with the current council in the following way:

I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing and that it is something worthwhile and useful. It is not what I expected. It seems very vague to me. I am not sure of what is expected of me. I think teachers should be asked what kind of things are helpful, what would make them more effective as teachers, and then make a plan that would work toward those goals. I would like to see a written plan for school council and better calendaring...I would like to see a job description for members of school council.... I am in charge of climate. I have been on council for a year and a half and have no clear idea of what climate is. I don't think anyone else does either.

From this statement, and others like it, I am drawn to the conclusion that the school, the jurisdiction and the school council have not provided in-service training to new council members. This appears to be a problem beyond Magrath, since the Renner Report (1999) states that “Alberta Learning, in partnership with school boards as well as other stake holders, [should] ensure there is sufficient opportunity for school council

members to receive training.” (p.6)

In conclusion, the issue of what people would have wanted to change while on school council is once again divided along the lines of dates of service. In this case, however, there is little difference between the opinions of staff and the opinions of parents. What parents felt four years ago is largely what staff thought four years ago. What parents believe now is largely echoed by staff now.

The issue of in-service training, however, is worthy of further discussion. The original school council was given extensive in-service regarding organization and their roles and responsibilities. Since then, however, it would seem that new people on school council have not been receiving the training that they need to contribute fully to the work of the school council. This lack of training could seriously undermine the ability of school council to provide the necessary services to make the school effective. Moreover, school councils may increasingly find that people will choose not to become involved with school council if they believe that the work of the council is increasingly meaningless.

CHAPTER FIVE

Problems and Issues for the Magrath School Council

An examination of the difficulties and successes that the Magrath School Council has experienced since its inception five years ago suggests, first, that the problems now are different than the problems of five years ago. Whereas the problems of five years ago were largely more contentious in nature, now one of the major issues that council must overcome is apathy. (“I perceive that apathy has overcome a sense of responsibility in parents,” said one parent member). Whereas the council five years ago seemed to have plenty of issues and lengthy agendas, that is not the case today.

Certainly the council of five years ago was faced with the challenge of developing a clearly- shared educational vision. The Ministry of Education and the Board of the Westwinds Regional Division in 1995-6 must share the responsibility for some of the misunderstandings that arose when the first council tried to define its roles and responsibilities. An examination of the minutes of the meetings in 1996 demonstrate this, as does the copy of the letter addressed to the superintendent from Alberta Education. The interview data gathered through this study give further indication that the issue of defining roles was one that occupied a lot of the first council’s attention and left some lingering residue of concern, even ill-feeling. Most of the original members consider the work they did preparing the bylaws and setting up the framework as very important to their time on council.

As previously mentioned, the question of the role of school councils and the limits of their power was centered around Section 17, clause 5 of the School Act, which states that the school council could, “Subject to the regulations, ... make and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its functions.” Some on

council were of the opinion that this gave council power to go beyond the parameters of an advisory role and assume more of the role traditionally filled by the regional board of education. “I firmly believed that decisions in our school needed to be on a local level,” stated one parent member at that time.

“I saw school council as an opportunity to have a more significant voice in providing direction and counsel to the local school, jointly fulfilling the educational responsibility,” wrote another.

It would appear that the province, in its attempt to provide school councils with the latitude to be willing to take on challenges and become an important decision making body, did not provide clear limits regarding role and responsibility. An examination of the minutes of the Magrath School Council shows that the regional school board, too, was not fully-prepared to handle some of the issues with which school councils presented it. The school division provided a stake holders meeting in April of 1996 in order to establish, within the school division, a set of guidelines for the responsibilities school councils. By April, the school councils were established and functioning. To provide in-service at that time would appear to be about seven months too late. The board of Westwind Regional Division at the time should shoulder some of the responsibility for some of the difficulties that the Magrath School Council had during establishment.

Roles of the Principal

The principal of the school and his role in the creation and the work of the school council has not been mentioned in this report to date. That is not to imply that his role was unimportant or insignificant, however. Feng (1997) notes that “*the principal* faces three major challenges.” (p.6) The principal of Magrath may have faced more than that. At the time of the organization of the school council, the principal made it very clear that

he welcomed the concept of a school council and saw it as an opportunity to improve relationships between the community and the school. In fact, he responded that he saw the school council as:

1. Providing administration with direct parental feedback in an advisory fashion.
2. Helping to fashion school policy and communicate that policy to parents.
3. Working in partnership with school administration to respond to community needs.
4. Providing active support for school projects that benefit students, faculty, and the community as a whole.

However, as the council began to debate issues that the principal considered to be outside the limits set out by the government, a power struggle ensued. When school council began to discuss personnel issues, the principal seems to have become alarmed. Mention is made in the April, 1996 minutes of a meeting with the staff regarding a “tape recorder in the teacher’s classroom.” Apparently, in one of the meetings of school council, it was mentioned that if there were problems with teachers then the solution would be to secretly record the teacher and it would be easy to prove incompetence. When staff members became aware of this statement, they were outraged. This necessitated a meeting between the staff and the chairman and a few others from school council to discuss the issue and put it to rest. It is a matter of record that, in retrospect, no parent member of the school council considered this to be an issue. However, for the principal, this was an issue of major proportions and, for the staff members interviewed

in this study, it was an issue of importance. One teacher recalled the mood of the time when he stated, "I was asked to resign by a member of the school council right there in the office."

In his reflections on the matter, the principal stated:

For me one of the major issues with the initial school council were the methods that some people felt they should use in dealing with personnel issues such as getting rid of teachers and there was also some real political issues on coaches as well. I felt the council were out of bounds in how they handled some aspects of those issues. Protecting school staff from not having due process was my major contribution in the initial years with the school council.

The other major issue for the principal was the decision of the board to divide the school into a both a secondary and elementary school. In order to properly understand the principal's position, the context within which it was done needs to be understood as well. Until 1986, the town of Magrath was home to two schools. In 1986, the decision was made by the board of the Cardston School Division #2 to unite the two schools into one as the result of an external evaluation. The town opposed this decision but, after much hue and cry, it was implemented. The principal was hired and was given the specific task of organizing the new, united school, complete with two of the previous administrators of both schools in place, serving as vice principals.

The principal then oversaw a number of changes in the school. The physical plant was changed to provide a central office, library, new gymnasium space, staff room and work rooms. Eventually, the previous administrators either retired or left, and the school

began to take on the identity of Magrath School. Therefore, when the Westwind Board began discussions within the community about whether or not to divide the school, it was hard for the principal not to take it as a personal attack on his administration. He did accept, however, that “while it was difficult for me personally I felt the council did give a forum for the discussion of two schools and the eventual return to two schools.”

A parent from that school council summed up the experience of the first school council and provided some indication as to the direction that the council has gone since.

My first year on school council, the members were united in trying to negotiate away from the school the rights and decisions we felt belonged to parents. The school was reluctant and fearful about sharing the education responsibility that had been exclusively theirs. My second year, some council members seemed to want to continue this adversarial relationship while others wanted to develop a good partnering relationship.

It would seem that after those initial controversies, the school council underwent some changes. The staff elected different representatives, ones that some believed would provide a stronger voice for them and the administration. Some new parent members and a chairman were elected when the school was united and, within a year, the principal had left in order to take a position at a university. These new council members accepted that they should not be involved in making decisions regarding staffing and most believed that they were an advisory body for the school. They began by organizing a welcome back breakfast for the students, strongly supported by staff and the two groups, working side by side the first week in September, began to break down the barriers that had built up over the previous year.

The Current Situation

Now, in the year 2000, the council seems to have evolved into a more complacent group. It would not be correct to say that they do not care about the school, or the children, but certainly they are not as involved in decision making as their predecessors. “I know that we don’t have a lot of say or that our words are written in stone but we can give our thoughts,” is the way one parent described council activity.

In some ways the initial and the current councils seem to have gone from one extreme to another, from wanting to be involved in every decision made in the school to preferring to be a group with little power or direction. The change is captured graphically in the comments of a current parent member. She wrote:

What exactly is our mandate? We discuss problems and offer solutions, but is that all that was intended when school councils were formed? I believe there is potential to use councils as a way to increase parental involvement in their children’s education, which is vital to a student’s success. I would like to see councils offering classes to parents, increasing community involvement in schools and leading the effort to make public education more effective.

It would seem, in a way, that the question the school council dealt with at its inception remains an issue today: “What is the function of the school council?” This question remains at the heart of the debate whenever one discusses the role of school council in Magrath.

One parent places blame on the provincial government, observing:

I don’t believe the provincial government was ever clear and explicit on

what the role of school councils were. This ambiguity created a power vacuum between schools and parents. What resulted is that parents did not assume the role and responsibility that could have been theirs. In the end nothing has really changed. I believe this is more true of the Junior Senior High Council. I hear or read nothing about this body and I am left to conclude that they are essentially ineffective.... From a cynical point of view, I wonder whether the government ever intended to give parents the authority and a meaningful voice in local education, or if the school council concept is all form and appearance with no power or substance.

Parents will not become involved in activities where they feel their input is not accepted as important. For this reason, some members choose not to remain involved in the school council and interest wanes. It would appear, then, that after five years of existence the Magrath School Council is still unsure of its mandate. As a council, it is clearly not as effective as it could be although, from an administrative perspective, it is much easier to work with, since it has evolved from a body which wanted local control to a body which sees its function as mostly communication.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusions and Recommendations

The major conclusion I have drawn from this study is that Magrath School Council members do not have a clear understanding of their role; not today, nor since the council's inception. This has reduced the effectiveness of the school council. The results of this study lead me to conclude that if the school council is to become more effective, then it must begin by gaining a clear understanding of its function and objectives. The council's role must be made clear, and each member must have the confidence and freedom to make suggestions that are taken seriously and given due consideration. In order to achieve this objective, it is imperative that school council members receive in-service assistance soon after they become members of council and they should continue to receive ongoing support and training for the time that they serve on council.

A second conclusion is that the school council now seems to be having little impact in and on the school, whereas at its inception it was seen as a central part of the school's activities. This change is shown most clearly in the way the athletics council now operates compared with how it did after the first year of the school council. This is also seen in the fact that, on recent staff meeting agendas, there is no mention made of school council activities. On occasion, a staff member from school council will mention something that school council is planning, but this is the exception rather than the rule. In addition, the number of members of the school council regularly attending their own meetings seems to be declining. This would indicate that the importance of school council meetings to these people is also diminishing. For example, a school council meeting in May, 1996 was held with all ten members present. A recent meeting in February, 2000, was attended by a mere five. Of the absentees, only one had bothered to send notice of

unavailability.

A third conclusion is that the school council has failed to focus on student achievement. The primary reason that it was organized in the first place was to assist schools, parents and community to work together to improve student achievement. Yet, in Magrath, the school council seems to work at providing support for the school's activities but is not involved in providing input as to how to improve the learning that is taking place at the school. If this is to change, it is imperative that the school council be given the ability to engage in genuine dialogue with all involved in order to discuss frankly and honestly the areas that are of greatest concern in the school, whatever they may be.

If the school council is to become effective, then it should begin by establishing a clear purpose. Parents, teachers and administration must all understand what the functions of school council will be and they must work together to establish goals and objectives for the school and the school council. All stake holders must agree upon a decision making process which will allow for input from all members, and value their opinions. This will not be easy.

The problem with school council as it currently functions is more a matter of opportunities lost than of errors being made. In this sense it is also related to my conclusion from this study of the Magrath School Council: if the school council is not an important part of the decision making process, it will not be able to contribute to the improvement of school achievement. Schools are a part of a greater community, whether they are in a small town like Magrath or a large city. A school cannot function effectively without that community and must rely on the support of all if it is to succeed. As charter schools and private schools now receive public money there is, in fact, some level of competition in the public school sector as parents are presented with choices of

where they can send their children. In this competitive market, Magrath School must respond more thoughtfully to parents' needs.

If school council can become more involved in providing meaningful input and suggestions in the school, the staff of the school may begin to feel less threatened when suggestions are made. At a staff meeting in September, 1997, when it was presented to staff that the school council wanted to sponsor a welcome back breakfast and the staff were asked for their support, the response of the staff was quite positive and all volunteered to assist and did so gladly. This show of support from staff was far different from the response when issues such as the reorganization of the athletics council were more or less forced upon the staff. Similarly, as school council currently works on a policy regarding school vandalism, the response from staff continues to be positive.

The value of school councils and their role in Alberta Schools continues to be an important issue. It is apparent, in the conclusions of the provincial government's Renner Report (1999), that the government continues to adjust the role of the school council in this province. However, it is equally apparent that the government is committed to the concept. With these realities in mind, it would seem that schools should do their best to ensure that they develop the most useful school councils they can. Failure to do so may lead either to confrontation, or ineffectiveness. Either way, the result will not be desirable. On the other hand, when a school is able to establish an effective school council, it has a better chance of gaining the support of the staff, parents, and administration in implementing programs that should lead to improved student achievement.

REFERENCES

- Alberta Education. (1993). *Meeting the challenge: What we heard..* Alberta, Alberta Education.
- Alberta Education. (1994). *Restructuring education: Government of Alberta news release..* Alberta, Alberta Education.
- Alberta Ministry of Education. (1994b). *A Better Way; A Plan for Serving Alberta's Future (Business plan 1994-1995 to 1996-1997)*. Alberta, Alberta Education.
- Alberta Education. (1995). *Roles and Responsibilities in Education*, Alberta: Alberta Education.
- Alberta Education. (1995b). *School Councils Handbook: Meaningful Involvement for the School Community*. Alberta, Alberta Education.
- Alberta Learning. (1999), *Ministers Forums on School Councils: final report: next steps*. Alberta, Alberta Learning
- Alberta School Act*. (1999). Queen's Printer for the Province of Alberta.
- Alkire, G. (1993). Leadership. *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 28-32
- Benson, D. (1998). School Council: An Administrator's Friend or Foe, *Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, San Diego Ca. 1-8.
- Bergman, A. (1992). Lessons for Principals From Site Based Management. *Educational Leadership*. 48-51.
- Canadian School Boards Association. (1995). *Who's Running Our Schools? Education Governance in the 90's Handbook*. Ottawa, Ont. 17-25.

- Collins, G., & Lahe, L. (1996). School Councils: Building Partnerships. *FWTAO/FAEO Newsletter*, 18-23.
- Cuban, L. (1990). Reforming Again and Again. *Educational Researcher*, 19, 3-13
- DeVries, K. (1992). New Designs for Tomorrows Schools, *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, 29-33.
- David, J. (1989). Synthesis of Research on School Based Management. *Educational Leadership*.46, 45-53.
- Elliot, O. (1994). *Edmonton Public Schools Staff Bulletin*. 8-9.
- Fullan, M. (1993). *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform*. London: Falmer Press.
- Fullan, M. (1993). Innovation Reform, and Restructuring Strategies. In G. Cawelti (Ed.), *Challenges and achievements of American education* . Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. 106-113.
- Gleadow, N. (1991). Developing a Structure for Parent Participation in the School. *The Canadian School Executive November*. 11-13.
- Goodlad, J. L. (1984). *A Place Called School*. New York, New York, McGraw Hill. 272-275.
- Hoffman, J.(1999) Parent Power. *Todays Parent*. September.42-49.
- Kannapel, P. (1994). *School Based Decision Making in Rural Kentucky Schools: Findings of a Five Year Longitudinal Study*, Appalachia Educational Lab., Charleston W.Va. 3-20.
- Levin, M. (1995). Will Councils Create Communities? *Orbit*. Vol 26, No. 2. 26-27.
- Littlewood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R.. (1998). Do School Councils Matter?

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego Ca. April . 8-12.

Minutes of the Magrath School Council 1996-present.

Neal, R.(1990). Deciding Who Does What. *The School Administrator*.
September.44-46.

Noble, B. (1995). A Parent Teacher Council That Works, *FWTAO Newsletter*,
March/April. 2-7.

O'Reilly, R. (1995). Personnel Evaluation in the Site-Based Managed School.
Challenge, Volume 32, Number 2. 6-11.

Pearl, S. (1995). Building School Councils.*Orbit. Vol. 26, No. 2.* 24-25.

Phillips, L. (1996). Collaborating With School Councils, *The Canadian School Executive*. October. 23-24.

Peterson-Del Mar, D. (1994). School Site Councils The Hard Work of Achieving
Grassroots Democracy. *Oregon School Study Council, Volume 37, Number 8* February. 1-
27.

Robertson, P. & Briggs, K. (1994). *Managing Change Through School Based
Management, Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research
Association.*, New Orleans, Louisiana. April. 3-27.

Roy, P.(1995). Participatory Decision Making: A Tool of Reform or an Empty
Promise. *Journal of Staff Development, Winter, Vol. 16, No. 1.* 18-22.

Rowley, S. (1989). Assessing Administrator Concerns about Site Based
Management, *Thrust*, November/December. 22-23.

School Councils Handbook, Alberta Education, June 1995.

Appendix A**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MAGRATH SCHOOL COUNCIL CASE STUDY**

1. What were some of the main reasons why you let your name stand to be on the Magrath School Council?
2. What did/do you see as the 3-4 most important functions of a school council in Alberta?
3. What did/do you consider to be the most valuable contributions you (have) made in your role as a school council member?
4. What do you consider the greatest success your school council achieved during your time as a member?

5. If you could change anything about your time on school council, what would it be?

6. Do you believe that the members of the school council worked collaboratively during your time on it?

7. What would make Alberta school councils more effective, in your opinion?

8. Do you have any other opinions or ideas about this or other school councils that you would like to have recorded in this study?

Appendix B
Consent Letter

Dear School Council Member:

I am conducting a study of the Magrath School Council and its work over the last five years. I hope that the study will produce evidence of ways in which school councils may improve and work more effectively. I am doing the study as a project requirement for the Masters of Education and The University of Lethbridge. I would like your permission to involve you in this study.

As part of this study, you will be asked to participate in a recorded interview with me that will be handled in a confidential and professional manner. If, at any time, you become uncomfortable with the interview, you should feel free to tell me. You can refuse to answer any of the questions. When the responses are released, they will be reported in summary form only. All names and any other identifying information will not be included in any discussion of the results. You have the right to withdraw from the study without prejudice at any time.

If you choose to do so, please indicate your willingness to participate by signing this letter in the space provided below.

I very much appreciate your assistance in this study. If you have any questions please feel free to call me at 758-6630 or 758-3366. Also feel free to contact the supervisor of my study, Dr. David Townsend, (329-2731) and/or the chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subject Research Committee if you wish additional information. The chairperson of the committee is Dr. Richard Butt, (329-2434)

Sincerely,

Darryl Christensen

(Please detach and forward the signed portion)

Name of Project: School Councils, A Case Study from Rural Alberta

I, _____, agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____