SASKATCHEWAN
School Boards
ASSOCIATION

Evaluating School Community Councils

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Acknowledgements

This research was conducted in the province of Saskatchewan in the traditional territories of First Nations and the homeland of the Métis Nation. The Saskatchewan School Boards Association, and the Métis researcher/writer, respects and honours the Treaties that were made on all territories in Saskatchewan, acknowledges the harms and mistakes of the past, and are committed to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous Nations in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA) undertook a learning-oriented evaluation of School Community Councils (SCCs) based upon a mandate from boards of education in Saskatchewan. The purpose of the review is to determine the current state of SCCs in relation to achieving their mandate, and to recommend to SCCs and education partners in Saskatchewan, areas for improvement. An evaluation of SCCs must include dialogue with the many individuals who play a role in SCCs, including, SCC members, school board members, Directors, Superintendents and other senior business officials, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, school principals and teachers, and this evaluation engaged approximately 120 participants in various aspects of the review.

The following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 1: That every school in Saskatchewan adopt community education philosophy and practices, to create an environment in which SCCs can thrive, and communities can be engaged.	Recommendation 2: That SCCs focus on their mandate to support improved student achievement.
1.1 That boards of education create a mandate for all schools to establish and sustain a school culture that is welcoming and inclusive to parents and community, and annually conduct assessments of such by parents and community members to determine such.	2.1 That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and boards of education launch a communication strategy for the provincial Pre-K – 12 education sector, including SCCs, parents, and communities, that clarifies the purpose of SCCs and their mandate.
1.2 That boards of education engage school staff and SCCs in ongoing professional development opportunities focused on community education philosophy and practices.	2.2 That boards of education review, and revise as necessary, their SCC resources and supports to ensure they are grounded in, and aligned with, the mandate of SCCs.
1.3 That school division recruitment and selection practices be reviewed to ensure the processes adequately attract and reward candidates who value youth, parent and community engagement, and whose practices demonstrates such.	2.3 That boards of education provide ongoing professional development opportunities for school staff and SCCs that focuses on their mandate to support improved student achievement.
1.4 That SCCs review their member election process and meeting structure, to determine if any of these formalities are impediments to the engagement of parents and community members, particularly for Indigenous and newcomers. If any are found, SCCs are encouraged to revise their bylaws and meeting practices as necessary, to create a more inviting, inclusive, and representative structure.	2.4 That fundraising not be permitted within SCCs to ensure SCCs are focused on their mandate. Where parents express an interest in fundraising, that school divisions create a separate structure (e.g., 'Friends of the School Name') for such purposes, and that this structure comply with financial accountability practices and operate within the set controls of the board of education.

Recommendation 3: That education partners in Saskatchewan provide adequate supports and create new supports for SCCs.	Recommendation 4: That the education sector prioritize youth, parent, and community engagement as a foundation of Saskatchewan's Pre-K – 12 education system and hold itself accountable to this end.
3.1 That the SSBA, in conjunction with LEADS, revise its existing resource, *School community councils: A handbook for School Community Councils and Principals,* in a fashion similar to the Council of Ontario's Directors of Education parent engagement guidebook, to more effectively provide SCCs and school staff with strategies, tools, and supports to focus on their mandate. 3.2 That education partners jointly develop and implement a strategy to support school principals to carry out their leadership role with SCCs. 3.3 That boards of education and SCCs review the school division existing supports for SCCs (e.g., technology, templates, handbook, etc.) to ensure they are functionally meeting the needs of SCCs to effectively carry out their mandate. That these existing supports be updated and/or new supports be created as required. 3.4 That boards of education be encouraged to formalize a division-wide SCC body comprising at least one representative from each SCC in the school division. That this body be co-chaired by the Chair of the board of education, and by an SCC representative appointed or elected from the body. That the structure provides a forum for networking amongst SCCs, to focus on the mandate of SCCs, and for ongoing professional development to assist SCCs to focus on their mandate. Most importantly, that this body provide advice to the board of education on improving student achievement, and facilitate networking between school board members, senior school division officials, and SCCs.	4.1 That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education prioritize youth, parent and community engagement in its vision for education and subsequent strategic plan for the sector. That this strategy effectively enlists SCCs in a meaningful way, and creates the expectations for schools to facilitate multiple means of engagement for youth, parents, and community – both within the SCC and with the school in general. That the plan be monitored for evidence towards this end. That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education establish a Parent Engagement Office to coordinate these efforts. 4.2 That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and boards of education advocate to post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan with teacher education programs, to develop required classes/curricula to support teacher candidates to be more familiar with engaging youth, parents, and community in support of student learning. That graduate-level programs similarly foster educational leadership towards this end. 4.3 That education partners advocate to the Saskatchewan Professional Teachers Regulatory Board to revise its academic requirements for teacher certification to include a required class in youth, parent, and community engagement as described in recommendation 4.2. 4.4 That SCCs conduct an annual self-evaluation to determine their ongoing effectiveness in achieving their mandate. That they communicate these results to their communities, as well as the board of education. That the SSBA develop a template to support the self-evaluation process.

INTRODUCTION

In Saskatchewan, a School Community Council (SCC) is mandated for every school in the province. SCCs were created in Saskatchewan in in 2006 during an upswing of community education and School[PLUS], and also within a context of school division amalgamations. The interest of the Government of Saskatchewan was to maintain strong local voice in schools within newly restructured school divisions, representative of the diversity of the school community, and focused on improved student achievement. Founded on principles of community education, a commitment was made to naming these structures "School Community Councils" as opposed to "School Advisory Councils" to demonstrate the value of parent and community engagement. Finally, their purpose (mandate) as specified in legislative and regulatory frameworks is to focus on supporting improved student learning. Though these structures have been around for over a decade, the data to determine their effectiveness in achieving their mandate is limited.

Purpose of the Evaluation

In November 2016 Boards of Education in Saskatchewan adopted the following resolution at the Saskatchewan School Boards Association annual general meeting:

> BE IT RESOLVED that the Saskatchewan School Boards Association Executive establish a working advisory group to evaluate the effectiveness of the current School Community Council framework in supporting the educational needs of schools and their communities and make recommendations to the government based on its findings. (Saskatchewan School Boards Association, 2016)

When SCCs were created 10 years ago, in part due to school division amalgamations, they were intended to retain local voice in larger school boards. They also were intended to focus on supporting student learning. Engagement of parents and community in schools remains a policy directive of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. Literature confirms that this engagement leads to improved student outcomes (Goodall, 2017; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011).

The Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) in Saskatchewan, agreed to by Boards of Education and the Ministry of Education, is a plan that contains ambitious goals to improve student outcomes, particularly for First Nations and Métis students.

Considering the SSBA 2016 adopted resolution, the ongoing educational policy directive for parent and community engagement, and the ambitious goals of the ESSP, the findings of this

study provide valuable information to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, to boards of education and their senior staff responsible for SCCs, to school staff and principals as they implement SCCs, and for SCCs across the province as they reflect on their roles.

Research Questions

Through a collaborative research approach, utilizing Ted Amendt as the researcher, the SSBA conducted an evaluation of SCCs in Saskatchewan in 2018. The questions that guided this evaluation include:

- How can a SCC facilitate parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes? What are the characteristics of a SCC that is facilitating parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes?
- What supports, considerations, or other critical elements are important for schools, school divisions, and the various education partners in the province to attend to, in order to assist SCCs in implementing their mandate?
- How do the roles of Boards of Education and SCCs inter-relate? What role may SCCs play in major education initiatives in Saskatchewan such as the Education Sector Strategic Plan, or reconciliation?
- What is the educational and social significance of well-functioning SCCs that are achieving their mandate?

Stakeholders

The following stakeholders were engaged and consulted in this evaluation:

   i.   SCC Members (parents) – urban
  ii.   SCC Members (parents) - rural
 iii.   Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA)
  iv.   Saskatchewan Ministry of Education
   v.   League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents (LEADS)
  vi.   Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF)
 vii.   Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials (SASBO)

In total, approximately 120 participants were engaged in this evaluation as described later in the Methodology section.

Logic Model

As part of this evaluation, a Logic Model was developed based upon the SCC mandate as expressed in policy, legislation, and regulations. A Logic Model is used in this evaluation to understand the intent of SCCs, and to determine if they are effectively achieving that mandate.

School Community Councils Logic Model

In Saskatchewan, each school is required to have a School Community Council, which facilitates parent and community participation in school planning, and provides advice to the board of education and the school's staff. In co-operation with the school staff, the SCC develop and recommend to its board of education for approval a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan.

Inputs	Outputs		Outcomes – Impact		
	Activities	*Participation*	*Short*	*Medium*	*Long*
• Time and talents of parents who attend and participate. • Youth perspectives (secondary school SCCs). • Professional development for school staff and SCC members. • School division financial resources (governance allocation) to support the SCC to achieve its mandate. • School division staff resources to support the SCC to achieve its mandate. • Education partners' resources to support the SCC to achieve its mandate. • Legislation, regulation, policy and information resources.	• Consultation with parents and community members. • Community engagement forums. • Information sharing at SCC meetings. • Community visioning and establishing shared beliefs. • Community asset mapping. • Developing a school level plan. • Communicating school performance results with parents and the wider community. • Dialogue with school board members to provide advice and to recommend a school level plan for approval. • SCC actions to address the school level plan.	• Five to nine elected members who are parents or guardians of pupils or community members, and members appointed by the board of education: one or two secondary students, principal, one teacher, and in consultation with the other members, any other appointed individuals. • Number of parents and community members attracted to participate in SCC events and activities.	• A school level plan which a core group of school staff, parents, and community members collaborate on and monitor for performance. • Improved student attendance. • Increased levels of student engagement in learning. • Improved student achievement outcomes evidenced through classroom and school division data. • Improved parent and community engagement in student learning.	• A school level plan which a broad and dynamic partnership of school staff, parents, and community members co-construct and monitor for performance. • Improved graduation rates. • Narrowing the inequity in achievement of FNMI learners and non-FNMI learners in the publicly funded education system. • Improved student achievement outcomes evidenced through classroom, school division, provincial, and national data. • Improved public support for schools/education.	• A school level plan which a broad and diverse dynamic partnership of school staff, parents, and community members co-construct and monitor for performance. • Improved learning success and well-being of all children and youth. • Citizenship and engagement in public education reflective of the diversity of Saskatchewan.

Assumptions
- Family and community engagement needs to occur in the activities that have the greatest impact on student learning. Prior to 2006, there is an assumption that activities of school council type structures in Saskatchewan were primarily involved in activities that did not have the greatest impact on student learning.
- That school staff, the Principal in particular, has the competency to work collaboratively with parents and community members, and believes that engagement is valuable in supporting student achievement.
- The school staff believes that parents and community members can effectively contribute to student learning.
- A school culture exists that is welcoming and valuing of parents and community members.
- That school staff and parents/community members are aware of the SCC mandate, and will focus their efforts on improving student achievement.

External Factors
- Varied levels of expectations and supports from the education partners to facilitate SCCs achieving their mandate.
- Time available by school staff and parents/community members to commit to SCCs.
- Distinct differences between communities – urban, rural, remote, Northern.
- Legacy of residential schools in Saskatchewan and its impact as a barrier to engagement of some Indigenous people in the school landscape.
- Varied comfort levels of school staff and parents with a formal SCC structure.
- Disengagement of some communities – marginalized, Indigenous, newcomers.
- Language barriers, both in terms of conversational use and understanding of the majority spoken English language, as well as understanding the education jargon and technical language often used by school staff.

Figure 1. School Community Councils Logic Model.

THE CONTEXT FOR SCCs

Timeline and Foundational Documents as Context for School Community Councils

To provide a historical timeline of events in Saskatchewan's K-12 education sector which led to the formation of SCCs, and which continue to impact them, I highlight important reports and policy documents which served to inform the formation of SCCs. These events and policy directions impacted significantly Saskatchewan's K-12 education sector and provide important context, as well as specific language of the day, that was a factor in arriving at SCCs.

Much of this work is situated in a context of community education based upon a philosophy that is grounded in principles of inclusion, shared responsibility and shared leadership.

> Community education seeks to build authentic and respectful connections among the school, the family, and the community to ensure success for all. …In a community education environment, a learning community is created when school staff, students, parents, community members, and human service providers plan, make decisions, and evaluate outcomes together. (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004, p. 38)

Community education philosophy foregrounds the connection between home and school and the education of children as centered in a context of family and community.

Community education and School^{PLUS}.

In 1999, the Government of Saskatchewan set up a 12-person Task Force to study the role of the school in Saskatchewan. The Task Force, chaired by Dr. Michael Tymchak from the University of Regina's Saskatchewan Instructional Development and Research Unit, conducted a variety of consultations and visited many schools during the period of 1999-2000. In *Task Force and Public Dialogue on the Role of the School: School^{PLUS} – A Vision for Children and Youth – Final Report to the Minister of Education, Government of Saskatchewan* (Tymchak, 2001), they used a metaphor relating the expanded roles of schools to the surface of the earth, earthquakes, and the "movement of tectonic plates" (p. 5). The school, like the surface of the earth, can be taken for granted until it is disturbed through tectonic factors that lie below. The Task Force described a host of "tectonic factors" that were having significant impact on schools, factors such as poverty, demographic shift, rural depopulation, violence, student attitudes and behaviour, and curriculum reform to name a few (p. 6). Among the numerous recommendations made by the Task Force, their number one recommendation was "that a Community Schools philosophy be adopted for all public schools in the province" (p. 47). This recommendation set the stage for an upswing in developments related to community education in the province.

In 2002, the Government of Saskatchewan responded to the Task Force in the document *Securing Saskatchewan's Future: Ensuring the Well-Being and Educational Success of Saskatchewan's Children and Youth. Provincial Response – Role of the School Task Force Final Report.* The Government of Saskatchewan accepted many of the recommendations, including the primary recommendation for the community schools philosophy to be adopted by all public schools in Saskatchewan. The province launched School[PLUS] and secured the commitment of Government's support across Ministries. The number of Community Schools was expanded in the province to 98, representing 12% of all schools in Saskatchewan.

School division amalgamations.

In 1990, the Minister of Education announced a review of School Finance and Governance in Saskatchewan, appointing Drs. Herve Langlois and Murray Scharf as consultants. They conducted an extensive review over the course of a year. In December 1991, they released the *School Finance and Governance Review Final Report*. In their final report they made a number of recommendations, including "that larger school divisions be established" (1991, p. 232) within certain established criteria, and "that a school council for each school be established within each larger school division" (p. 233). They noted that some of the duties of the council would include "religious education and language of instruction", "consideration of educational and budgetary proposals for the school", and to "review school level initiatives under the Adaptive Dimension of the Core Curriculum and locally-developed courses" (p. 233). Following the release of the report, "there was no consensus on the recommendations" (Melvin, 2006, p. 54). Melvin adds this further analysis:

> Complicating this situation was the change in government in 1991. The new NDP administration may have recognized the value of the work but had no political commitment to it. As well, the larger problems for the government centred on the budget deficit and delivery of health care which commanded a greater share of provincial resources. (p. 54)

Over the next decade in Saskatchewan, there would be a period of voluntary school division amalgamations, albeit limited in scope.

In 2003, the Government of Saskatchewan created the Commission on Financing Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education and named Ray Boughen as Commissioner. Over a period of eight months, the 'Boughen Commission,' as it is referred to, engaged the education community, municipal governments, provincial government, and public in a dialogue surrounding the key question, "What is the best way to finance K-12 education in Saskatchewan?" (Boughen, 2003, p. 12). The Commission released their final report in December 2003, *Finding the Balance* (Boughen, 2003). Among its many recommendations related to equity and educational financing, the Commission recommended that "the province establish a task force to

recommend to the Minister of Learning revised Saskatchewan school division boundaries to increase equity among school divisions and maintain local responsiveness and accountability" (p. 109). As a result, the K-12 landscape in the province was soon to look significantly different.

In May 2004, the Minister of Learning established the Education Equity Task Force to recommend a map of restructured school division boundaries. The Task Force met with education stakeholders in Saskatchewan over a period of five months. Their final report, *Restructured Saskatchewan School Division Boundaries – Report of the Education Equity Task Force to the Minister of Learning* was submitted in November 2004 (Herron, Batters, & Klassen, 2004). The report noted that Government and school divisions had been working together on voluntary amalgamations for many years, however, this resulted in few voluntary amalgamations. In their report, they recommended reducing the number of school divisions from 82 to 34 (p. 13). The Government of Saskatchewan eventually determined there would be 28 school divisions in Saskatchewan as of 2006.

Community education foundational documents.

In 1999, Saskatchewan Education released the document *Parent and Community Partnerships in Education - Policy Framework*. This policy framework set an expectation for the provincial education system to build partnerships with parents and community as a way of schooling to support students, noting:

> Effective parent and community involvement and partnerships are qualitatively different than a single program or activity. They require a committed perspective that permeates all activities in the school and school division. The overall attitude and culture is welcoming and inclusive. (Saskatchewan Education, 1999, p. 12)

In 2004, *Building Communities of Hope: Effective Practices for Meeting the Diverse Learning Needs of Children and Youth – Community Schools Policy and Conceptual Framework*, was revised to align with School^{PLUS}, replacing the previous 1996 document (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004). The revised framework highlighted the importance of parent and community engagement in all areas of the school, including the learning program, and became relevant to all schools in the province as they learned to implement community education principles in their practices.

In 2005, the Department of Learning released the new high school policy framework, *Toward School^{PLUS}: Empowering High Schools as Communities of Learning and Support* (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). Within this document, youth, parent, and community engagement is the foundation for all the effective practices described to rethink teaching and learning, enhance the culture and climate of high schools, and improve educational outcomes.

The development of School Community Councils.

In January 2005, the Minister of Learning announced the formation of the Local Accountability and Partnerships Panel. The purpose of the Panel was to ensure that parents and community continued to have a strong voice in schools and in newly restructured school divisions. The Panel's task was to recommend a framework for "local accountability, community involvement and partnerships at the school level" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, np). The Local Accountability and Partnerships Panel released their final report to the Minister of Learning in May 2005. The report recommended the creation of a School Advisory Committee for each public school in the province whose purpose was to "encourage and facilitate parent and community engagement and develop shared responsibility for the learning success and well-being of all children and youth" (Melvin, Gange, & Shaddock, 2005, p. vi).

In November 2005, Saskatchewan Learning released *Toward School^PLUS: Policy Directions for School Community Councils – Provincial Response to the Local Accountability and Partnerships Panel, Final Report* (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). In this report, the authors proposed a framework for SCCs to be formed by each public school in the province. The report authors were purposeful in using the term School Community Council as opposed to School Advisory Committee as recommended by the Local Accountability and Partnerships Panel, noting that "while the Panel used the term **School Advisory Committee**, **School Community Council** is being adopted in Government's Response to reflect the importance of parent and community engagement in the role of the new structures" (p. 2), and to "ensure[e] authentic engagement of parents and community in learning success" (p. 4). The report stated:

> Saskatchewan's educational community has been well aware of the value and importance of family and community engagement for some time and Saskatchewan Learning has promoted authentic parent and community engagement through policy and programs, such as the Community Schools Program and School^PLUS. However, these efforts have not ensured consistent practice across the province, nor have they ensured that parents and community members are involved in activities that will have the greatest impact on student learning. (p. 4)

The SCC purpose is to "develop shared responsibility for the learning success and well-being of all children and youth, and encourage and facilitate parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes" (p. 8). The document lays out the governance structure, operations, and composition of the SCC, highlighting a need for it to be representative of the community and to pay particular attention to First Nations representation. It also includes school staff on each SCC, with representation by one teacher as well as the school principal. The *Education Act* and *Regulations* were subsequently updated in 2006 to reflect these changes.

The SSBA (n.d.) created the document *School Community Councils: A Handbook for School Community Councils and Principals.* This handbook provided operational support to SCCs and principals, such as how to establish a constitution, conduct elections, communications, and evaluate their work. The document contains language that reaffirms the focus on the engagement of the SCC in the learning improvement plan.

An evaluation of School Community Councils.

An evaluation of SCCs was conducted in 2010, led by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education with the support of an advisory committee of education partners. The evaluation methods included interviews with individuals involved in the policy development, design, and implementation of SCCs; three focus groups with SCC members; and a web-based survey with 1009 respondents. The evaluation focused on implementation of SCCs since their inception in 2006, and identified supports they were receiving from school divisions, communication matters, and their effectiveness as it related to supporting learning improvement plans.

In 2013, *The Education Regulations*, *1986* was updated to address concerns raised in the 2010 evaluation. This included updating the former section that required the majority of SCC members to be parents of pupils who attend the school so that this no longer applies if the majority of the pupils are 18 years of age or older and do not live with a parent. The Regulations were also amended to grant Boards of Education the ability to give administrators responsibility for approval of the SCCs constitution. In 2015, *The Education Regulations, 1986* was amended and the term "learning improvement plan" was replaced by "school level plan" in response to concerns from school division personnel. The revised terminology is consistent with language in the provincial Education Sector Strategic Plan[1].

Recent interest in school community councils.

As outlined earlier, in November 2016 Boards of Education in Saskatchewan adopted a resolution at the SSBA annual general meeting to evaluate SCCs. At that same meeting, the Saskatchewan Minister of Education announced that Dan Perrins, a former Deputy Minister to the Premier and long-time civil servant in Saskatchewan, had been appointed to provide a paper to the Minister of Education on Educational Governance options. Included in his report, Perrins (2016) identified the critical role that SCCs provide for parents and community members to have a voice. He noted that "recent conversations suggest that boards have different relationships with their school community councils" (p. 17) as based upon a review of school division annual reports where varied levels of participation are documented. Perrins concluded that some school divisions actively engage SCCs in planning and development of priorities, while others merely present the plan to SCCs for review and feedback.

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[1] The Education Sector Strategic Plan is a province-wide plan developed by education partners in Saskatchewan, approved by the 28 school boards and accepted by the Government of Saskatchewan. The plan sets priority actions to produce short and long-term outcome goals for education.

Following the Perrins report, the Saskatchewan Minister of Education appointed an Educational Governance Advisory Panel in 2017. The task of the Panel was to consult with educational partners and the public on education governance in Saskatchewan, and submit a report to the Minister of Education outlining the summary of the consultations. Among the findings in their final report, the Educational Governance Advisory Panel concluded that "there is opportunity for greater engagement with SCCs [School Community Councils] and students in planning and policy" (Educational Governance Advisory Panel, 2017, p. 29). In response to the Panel report, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education established an Education Governance Renewal Office in March 2017. Further to this recommendation, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education communicated their desire for a "strategy to develop consistent capacity for all School Community Councils" (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017, np).

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

A Cross Country Scan of School Councils in Canada

School council type structures exist across Canada, with variations on the nomenclature used to refer to them (e.g., District Education Councils, School Community Councils, School Advisory Councils, etc.). In most instances, there is one school council for each school in the province or territory. The school council is most often comprised of parents of students in the school, a secondary student (in secondary schools), the school principal, and other staff and community members. The school councils are focused on school matters to varying degrees of autonomy, from participation to decision-making. Some jurisdictions have a district structure of school councils to provide advice to the board of education. In most jurisdictions, an association of school councils is in place that is independent, advocates to Government on behalf of school councils, and provides some level of supports to school councils.

This cross-country scan is drawn from provincial and territorial legislative and/or regulatory frameworks related to school councils. In my examination, I analyze the structures and the language used to describe the school councils' authority and present the summary in tables depicting the models, mandates related to learning plans, and the spectrum of authority of school councils in Canada. My analysis is limited solely to the information obtained through websites and the language therein, and is not intended to be an evaluation of the state of school councils across Canada or their practices as aligned, or not aligned, with their legislative and/or regulatory or policy direction.

British Columbia.

In British Columbia, a parents' advisory council may be created for each school in the province. It may advise the Board and the principal and staff of the school respecting any matter relating to the school. In addition, a district parents' advisory council may be created that comprises one representative from each parents' advisory council. The district parents' advisory council advises the board of education on any matter related to education in the district.

Alberta.

In Alberta, a school council must be established for each school in the province. The school council may advise the principal and the board on any matter relating to the school. A board must provide the school council with an opportunity to provide advice on the development of the school's mission, vision and philosophy; policies; annual education plan; annual results report; and budget. A board must also provide the school council with the school's provincial

testing program results and other provincial measures and a reasonable interpretation of those results and measures. Given that the Regulations outline the responsibility of the board to provide the school council with student achievement results, it is assumed that the school council is to have a role in student learning and achievement.

Saskatchewan.

In Saskatchewan, each school is required to have a school council, formally referred to as a School Community Council, which facilitates parent and community participation in school planning, and provides advice to the board of education and the school's staff. In co-operation with the school staff, the SCC develop and recommend to its board of education for approval a learning improvement plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan.
The Saskatchewan School Boards Association (n.d.) *Handbook for School Community Councils* is a resource that provides operational supports regarding the logistics of the functioning of a SCC.   It includes tips on such matters as setting agenda, conducting a meeting, and communications.

Manitoba.

In Manitoba, an advisory council may be established for each school. The advisory council may advise the principal on a number of school policies, activities, on organization, and participate in developing an annual school plan. The Manitoba Association of Parent Councils is an organization of school-based parent groups in Manitoba. There is a requirement for the Minister of Education to meet with this association at least once annually.

Ontario.

In Ontario a school council is an advisory body that is in place for each school. Through active participation of parents, the purpose of the school council is to improve pupil achievement primarily by making recommendations to the school principal and the board of education. The board of education is required to solicit the views of school councils as it relates to policies, implementation plans, and accountability as it relates to pupil achievement. In addition to a school council, a Parent Involvement Committee is created at the board level. The purpose of a Parent Involvement Committee is to support, encourage and enhance parent engagement at the board level in order to improve student achievement. The role of the parent involvement committee is to advise the board and the board's director of education on matters primarily related to communicating with parents.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has a parent engagement policy that outlines the vision, strategies and actions required by education partners to achieve the policy (Government of Ontario, 2010). The vision includes a statement that all educational partners in Ontario "acknowledge the positive impact of parent engagement on student achievement" (p. 7). In

support of this policy, the Ontario Ministry of Education has a Parent Engagement Office which supports parent engagement through information and resources (e.g., fact sheets, information on school councils and Parent Involvement Committees, and tips for running effective meetings). A guide for school councils is also available. Not unlike Saskatchewan's document, it provides support to school council members regarding the logistics of school councils – establishing bylaws, elections, running meetings, assessing the council's effectiveness, agenda setting, meeting minutes, and consultation.

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education created a document that provides tips and examples of ways to engage parents, as well as strategies to support ongoing parent engagement such as through an annual planning calendar, forming welcoming committees, and providing childminding and transportation to parents to attend school council meetings (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2012). The writers acknowledge that parent engagement can occur beyond the formal structures of a school council or parent involvement committee and highlight examples to do this, such as keeping the library open for parents, or providing access to a computer and internet. A few examples are provided for parents to engage, such as organizing workshops with parent and community members as presenters. Finally, the writers also describe the importance of organizing parents and the community and getting parent voice. To that end, a sample parent survey is included along with tips on analyzing survey data.

Quebec.

In Quebec, a governing board is established for each school that is granted considerable authority for oversight and decision making. The governing board analyzes the needs and approves the school's "educational project," essentially a school plan, and annually evaluates the results and communicates this to parents. The governing board also approves the time allocation for compulsory and elective subjects. In addition to the governing board, parents may decide to form a parent participation organization, a body of parents who advise the parents' representatives on the governing board regarding any matter of concern to parents. The purpose of a parent participation organization is to encourage the collaboration of parents in developing, implementing and periodically evaluating the school's educational project and participating in fostering their children's success.

New Brunswick.

New Brunswick requires a parent school support committee for each school in the province. The parent school support committee advises the principal on the establishment, implementation, and monitoring of the school improvement plan. The parent school support committee can also participate, through the Chair, in the selection of the school principal and vice-principal, as well as review the results of the school's performance report. The parent school support committee can also communicate with the District Education Council.

Prince Edward Island.

In Prince Edward Island, parents may establish a school council or home and school association. Their role is to provide feedback to the principal on a variety of matters related to school operations. They can also advise, if required, on the school effectiveness plan, and advise, if requested by the education authority, on the selection of the school principal. A District Advisory Council may be created by the Minister of Education, which is a group that comprises one representative from each school council. The District Advisory Council advises the Minister on education issues, engages school communities in discussions on education issues, and fosters collaboration on education issues in the district that the Council serves.

Nova Scotia.

In Nova Scotia, a school board must establish a school advisory council when parents, the principal, or the home and school association make such a request. The school advisory council consults with school staff and develops and recommends to the school board, a school's improvement plan. They also participate in the selection of the school principal through a representative on the school board's selection committee.

Newfoundland and Labrador.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, a school principal must establish a school council for the school. The school council develops, encourages and promotes policies and practices to enhance the quality of the school program. The school council approves for recommendation to the school board, a plan for improved teaching and learning at the school, and assists in monitoring the performance reports of the school.

Yukon.

In Yukon, there is a school council for each attendance area established by the Minister of Education. A Council reviews, modifies if necessary and approves the school objectives, educational priorities and courses of study by grade levels, as prepared by the school administration. They also participate in the selection procedures and appointment of a school principal. A school council may also propose locally developed courses of study.

Northwest Territories.

Northwest Territories does not appear to have a school council type structure for schools. Their Education Act includes a section on parent participation which primarily addresses a parent's responsibility to be informed of the progress of their child and to be involved in making decisions that significantly affect the education, health or safety of the student. Parents

are also expected to cooperate with the education staff who deliver the education program to the student.

Nunavut.

Similar to the Northwest Territories, Nunavut does not appear to have a school council type structure for schools. Their Education Act includes a section on parent participation which primarily addresses a parent's responsibility to be informed of the progress of the child and to be involved in decisions that affect the student's education or the student's health or safety in the school. Parents are expected to encourage the student to learn and to support the teachers in their efforts to educate the student. The principal is directed to keep parents and the community informed of events and activities at the school.

School council associations.

Beyond the school councils and sometimes district councils, most jurisdictions have an association of school councils. It appears membership is voluntary in these associations, however most websites did not provide adequate information about their membership to determine if they truly are representative of the majority of school councils within the jurisdiction. Two jurisdictions, Manitoba and Ontario, include a reference to these associations in their legislative and/or regulatory frameworks. In Manitoba, the Minister of Education must meet with this association annually, and in Ontario there is provision for a representative of the association to be included on the Parent Involvement Committee. These associations are independent of government and school boards, and provide advocacy and supports for school councils. These supports can include operational resource materials such as effective meeting management, agenda setting, role of Chair, and so on.

School Council Models in Canada

Most of the jurisdictions allow for the creation of a school council for each school, or in some cases, a school council for more than one school, which advises on the school(s). Four jurisdictions (British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) allow for the creation of a district-type structure, a representative body of a collective of school councils within a school district, which provides advice to the board of education. While the evidence to determine the effectiveness of this type of structure was not reviewed, a legislative and/or regulatory framework that provides for this structure may be evidence of the value placed on parent and community engagement in education by the board of education, and a support mechanism created for school councils to foster effective interaction among themselves as well as with the board of education. With their own unique variation on this, Quebec has a school council (governing board) with extensive authority over the school. In addition to this, a parent participation organization may be formed at each school. The purpose of this structure is to engage parents in supporting and evaluating the school's learning improvement plan (school's

educational project), and to provide feedback and support to the parents on the school council (governing board). This two-tiered approach to engaging parents in the critical aspects of the school at the local level signals a belief in the value of parents in improving student achievement. It also facilitates multiple avenues of engagement for parents as opposed to solely the school council. See Figure 2 for a visual of the models of school councils in Canada.
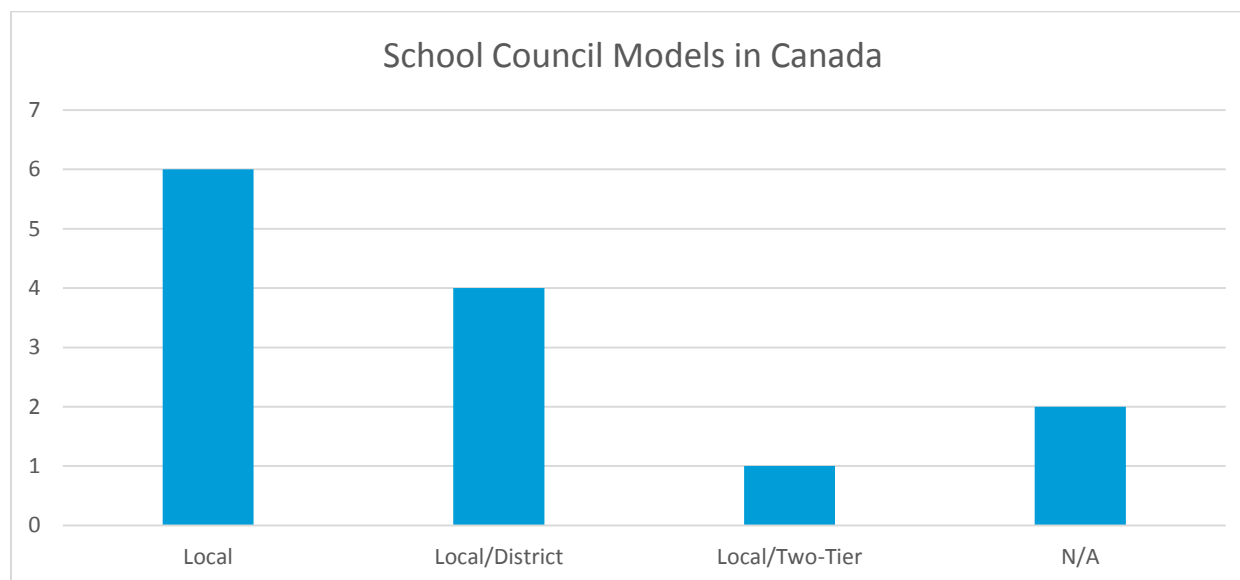

Figure 2. School Council Models in Canada.

School Councils in Canada and Their Connection to Learning Initiatives

It is important to connect parent and community engagement in schools to teaching and learning to have a positive impact on student achievement (Goodall, 2017; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011). One way to facilitate parent engagement in teaching and learning is for the school council to have some responsibility for a school annual plan, learning improvement plan or a similar-type process linked to planning, monitoring, and reporting on student achievement. I differentiate between parent "involvement" and parent "engagement" based on the authenticity of the relationship – where "involvement" is school staff or system controlled, and "engagement" is co-constructed between parents and the school staff or system (Amendt, 2008). In the analysis that follows, I use the term "involvement" when there is not enough evidence or consistency in practices to demonstrate authentic "engagement" of parents.

As depicted in Figure 3, the clear majority of school councils in Canada have a mandate that provides them with some "involvement" in and responsibility for a school annual plan – recognition of the value of linking the school council to teaching and learning initiatives. Nunavut and Northwest Territories do not have school council type structures and hence parents are not "involved" in the school annual plan. In British Columbia, the parent council

may advise on any matter respecting the school, however no specific reference to supporting or developing an annual plan is referenced, and therefore it is listed as "unclear" in Figure 3.
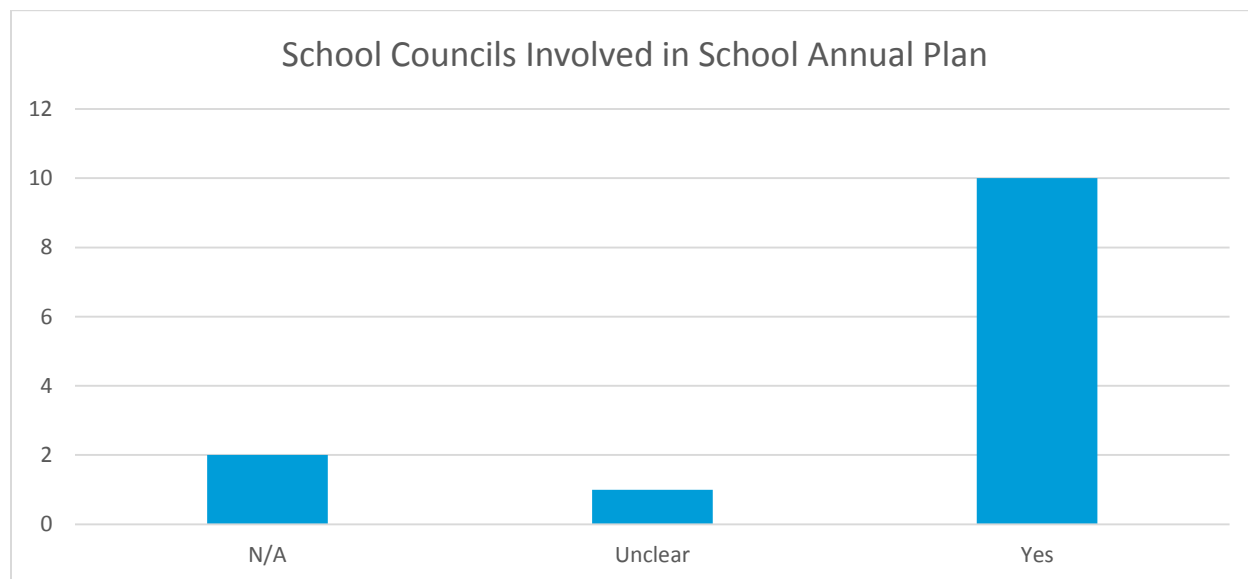

Figure 3. School Councils Involved in School Annual Plan.

School Councils in Canada and Their Spectrum of Authority

An examination of the language used in the legislative and/or regulatory or policy frameworks for school councils was conducted to identify the authenticity of the relationship of the school council with the school. For this analysis, language in the legislative and/or regulatory and policy frameworks that included "may" or "could," as well as "advisory," "provide feedback," "participate in," or "advise if requested" was deemed to be lower on the spectrum of authority of shared decision-making in a collaborative partnership, when compared to language in other frameworks such as "review, modify and approve" or "develop."

As outlined in Figure 4, five jurisdictions (British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island) use language that places the school council in an "advisory" capacity to the school and/or school board. Three jurisdictions (Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador) include some elements that are similarly advisory in nature, but were separated out in this analysis for including language that provided the school council authority to "develop" learning improvement plans rather than simply advise on them. In these three jurisdictions, however, the school council "recommends" such plans to the school and/or school board for their approval. In contrast, three jurisdictions (Yukon, Ontario, and Quebec) include language that provides authority for the school council to "review, modify and approve," or compels the school board to consult with the school council ("shall") in learning improvement or school annual plans. As stated earlier, Nunavut and Northwest Territories do not have school council structures and so they are listed as N/A.
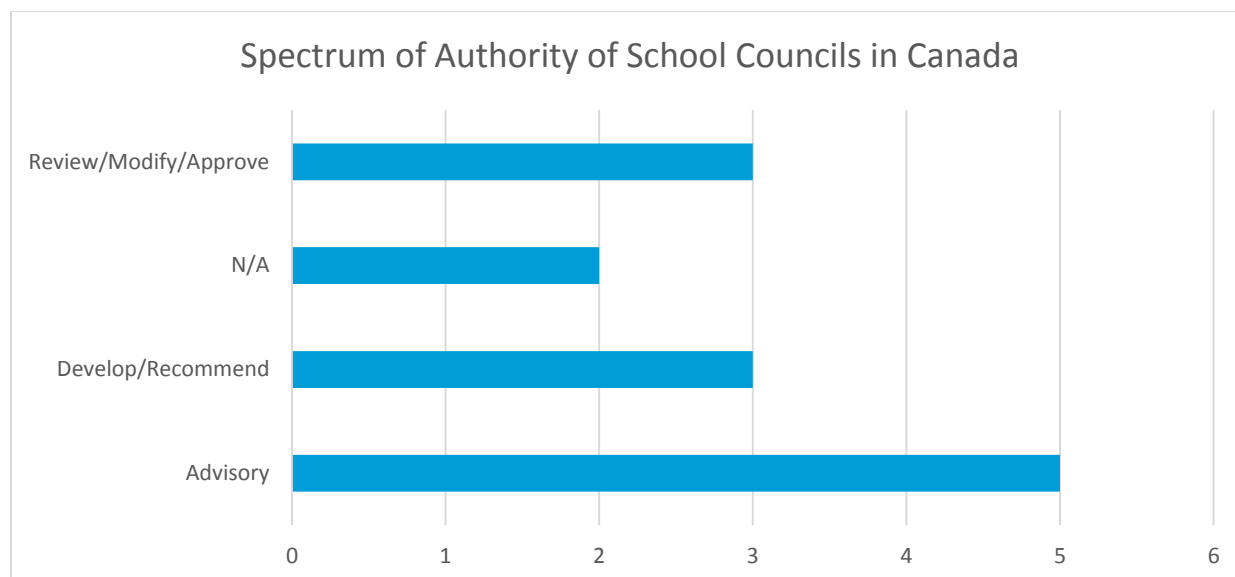
Figure 4. Spectrum of Authority of School Councils in Canada.

In the legislative and/or regulatory frameworks of the Yukon, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia, school councils are granted the authority to participate in the selection of the school principal. As the school principal plays a key role in school and its relationship with families and community members, this authority of the school council is deemed noteworthy.

An examination of school councils in Canada confirms that most jurisdictions have such a structure for each school in the province, and that they most often have a direct legislative and/or regulatory mandate to focus on student learning. An analysis of the legislative and/or regulatory or policy frameworks demonstrates a spectrum of authority, and divergent approaches to powers granted to school councils to carry out their functions – from advisory to decision-makers. If most jurisdictions clearly value a role for parents and community members in schools by having a school council structure, and most school councils have a mandate to focus on improved student learning, evidence that the jurisdictions assume that parents have an interest and a role in improved student learning, then what gets in the way of school councils achieving this mandate? That jurisdictions have divergent approaches to granting authority to school councils, from advisory to decision-maker roles, is interesting and perhaps evidence of the beliefs and assumptions inherent in the K-12 education system as it relates to the role of parents on the school landscape.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For the purpose of this collaborative evaluation, it is important to seek the voices of School Community Council members (urban and rural), school board members, as well as Directors of Education, School Superintendents, school business officials with responsibilities for SCCs, principals and teachers who have firsthand experience with SCCs, and Ministry officials who have responsibilities for SCCs.

Methods

The methods that were utilized to conduct this evaluation included research sharing circles and focus groups.

Research sharing circles.

Two research sharing circles were held at existing annual events in Saskatchewan that include attendees from two sample targets for this evaluation – the National Congress on Rural Education (Rural Congress), and the Saskatchewan School Boards Association Spring Assembly. Rural Congress is an annual event in Saskatchewan, of which a large number of rural SCC members historically attend. Rural Congress was held in March 2018. One session offered for attendees to self-select was linked to this evaluation, and participants were informed that data would be collected from the session for this evaluation. Approximately 35-40 people attended the session of which the majority of attendees identified as rural SCC members. Participants organized themselves into six groups and were provided questions (Appendix A). Groups were provided flipchart paper and markers to document their responses. These flipchart papers were collected to form the data from the SCC rural members research sharing circle.

SSBA Spring Assembly is an annual event in Saskatchewan for school board members and Directors of Education. It was held in April 2018. One session offered for attendees to self-select was linked to this evaluation, and participants were informed that data would be collected for this evaluation. Approximately 45-50 people attended the session. Participants organized themselves into ten groups and were provided questions (Appendix A). Groups were provided flipchart paper and markers to document their responses. These flipchart papers were collected to form the data from the school board members and Directors of Education research sharing circle.

Focus groups.

Three focus groups were arranged as part of this evaluation. Two focus groups were for representatives from education partners (the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, SSBA, SASBO, LEADS, and the STF), one held in Saskatoon, and one held in Regina in order to accommodate participants attending from various locations across the province. The third focus group was for SCC urban members attending from both a large urban public school division, and a large urban Catholic school division.

Letters of invitation were sent to education partners to name representatives for the two focus groups. Education partners each established their own processes to invite members to participate and submitted names of representatives. Once named, participants were emailed the focus group questions in advance of the session. In total, 20 participants attended the two focus groups representing education partners. Notes were taken during the focus groups, however no names were documented in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The notes were distributed to the focus group participants following the session for confirmation of the accuracy of the notes. Minor edits were made following this process.

For the SCC urban members focus group, letters of invitation were sent to the two school divisions requesting them to name SCC members (parents). Each school division established their own processes to invite SCC members to participate and submitted names of SCC members for the focus group. Once named, participants were emailed the focus group questions in advance of the session. In total, eight participants attended the focus group representing public and Catholic school divisions. Notes were taken during the focus group, however no names were documented in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The notes were distributed to the focus group participants following the session for confirmation of the accuracy of the notes. Minor edits were made following this process.

Validity

In efforts to maximize the trustworthiness of this program evaluation, a number of steps were taken:

- The scope of the research was negotiated between the researcher, T. Amendt, and the SSBA, with the SSBA providing approval of the scope.
- Participation at the two research sharing circles (Rural Congress, and the SSBA Spring Assembly), participants voluntarily selected attending the session, and the data collected was restricted entirely to the notes participants/groups submitted upon conclusion of the sessions.
- Participation in the focus groups was by invitation to education partners (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, LEADS, STF, SASBO, and SSBA), as well as to two urban school divisions for the SCC Urban focus group. Representatives from these organizations

responded voluntarily to a call submitted by each respective organization. Focus group participants received the focus group questions a minimum of two weeks prior to the focus group.

- Notes were taken at each focus group, and the notes were submitted to the focus group participants following the session to confirm the validity of the notes as an accurate reflection of the focus group conversation. Minor edits were made to the notes following this process.
- A five-member interpretation panel comprising senior officials of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, STF, LEADS, SASBO, and the SSBA was formed to review all the data collected through the evaluation and assist the researcher in the data analysis and identification of themes.

Limitations

There are at least two limitations of this study – sample and time. In terms of sample, the participants in the research sharing circles are limited to those individuals attending the two events who voluntarily agree to attend the session. In terms of the focus groups, it is limited to two opportunities for school division and Saskatchewan Ministry of Education officials with responsibilities for SCCs to attend, as named by their respective organizations, namely, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, LEADS, SASBO, and the STF. It is also limited to the one urban SCC focus group. The data collection and the analysis are therefore based solely on this data, which may not be representative of the experiences of all 700+ SCCs in Saskatchewan. In terms of time, the study is limited to data collection activities which took place over a three-month period.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethics approval of the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board, and under the supervision of Dr. Debbie Pushor of the University of Saskatchewan. The study was conducted within the authority of the Saskatchewan School Boards Association through a mandate approved by boards of education in the province, and within a research scope that the SSBA approved. Participation was voluntary and participants signed consent forms prior to engaging in aspects of the study. Participant names are kept confidential, and secondary use of the data collected is not permitted. To add credibility to this evaluation and to mitigate any potential conflict of interest with T. Amendt, an SSBA employee acting as Researcher, a five-member interpretation panel of education partners in Saskatchewan was created to review the data collected and collaborate on the data analysis.

FINDINGS

Following the data collection process, a five-member interpretation panel was convened comprising senior officials from education partners in Saskatchewan – the Ministry of Education, the Saskatchewan School Boards Association, the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, the Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials, and the League of Educational Administrators, Directors, and Superintendents. Together with the researcher, this panel analyzed the data collected through this evaluation to identify patterns and themes from the data. It also provided opportunity to see convergence of perspectives, as well as divergence, both of which are noted in this section. This process acknowledges the important role each education partner plays in Saskatchewan's provincial education system, including their roles with SCCs, and honours the perspectives each education partner brings to this topic. It also brings transparency into this evaluation and adds validity to the findings.

A Sense of a Mandate Not Achieved

All participants were asked to respond to a scenario to determine the current state of engagement of SCCs in co-constructing the school level plan (See Appendix A). When responding to the three scenarios, 'B' is the most common scenario with which the groups identify. It is interesting to note that SCC Urban Members are nearly as likely to respond 'A', indicating that they are not engaged in co-constructing the school level plan, while SCC Rural Members did not select 'A' at all, indicating they are more likely to have a role in co-constructing the school level plan. The Education Partners are more likely to respond 'C' than they are to respond 'A', indicating they believe SCCs are engaged in co-constructing the school level plan. Figure 5 displays the responses by participant group.

"You just bake things like back in the 50's." **(SCC member)**

"There is a lack of awareness of what the mandate is." **(SCC member)**

"Lack of understanding of what SCCs should be doing by Admin and members." **(SCC member)**
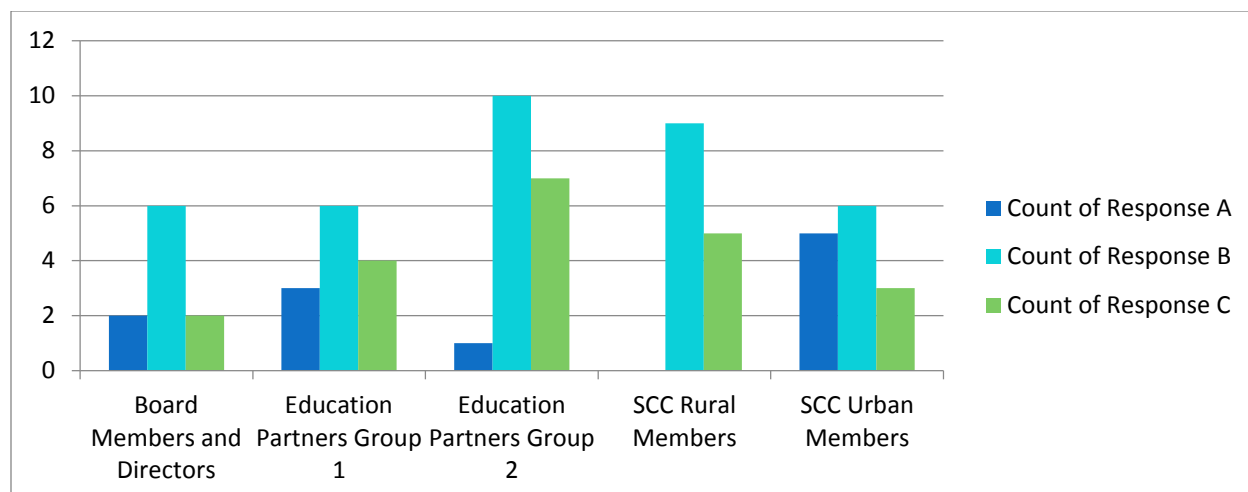
Figure 5. Responses to Scenario Question by Groups.

Many respondents were unable to select one response to the scenario question, but rather often identified with a spectrum of experiences (e.g., have experienced A through C at different times, or suggesting they are somewhere between responses 'A-B' or 'B-C'.) Figure 6 displays the spectrum of responses by participant group.
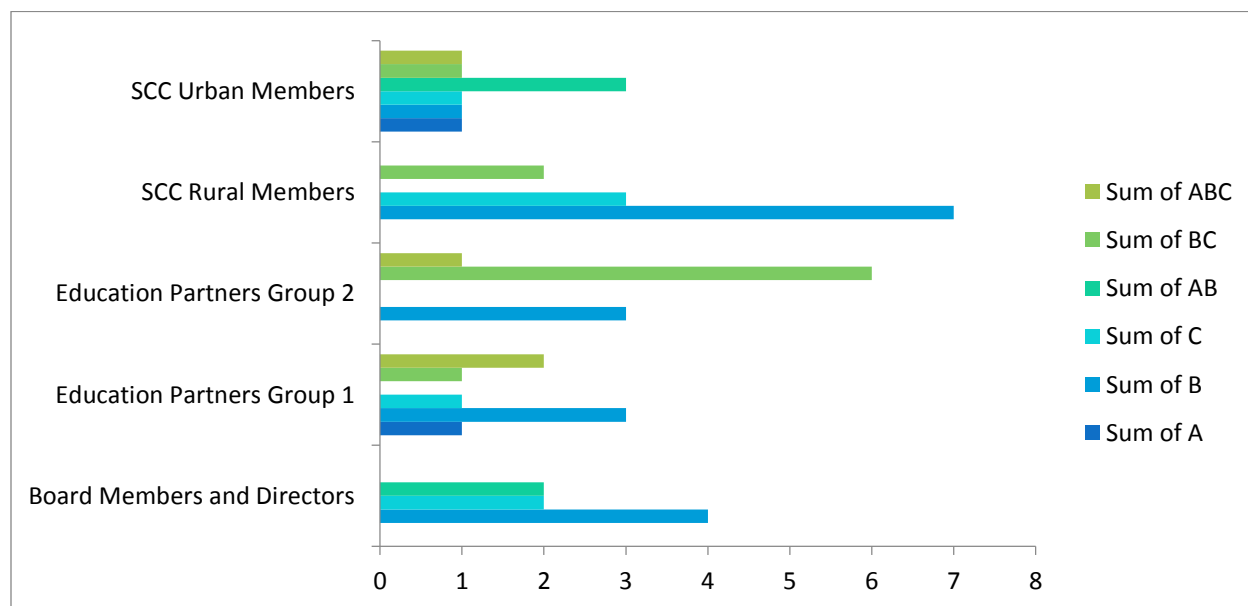

Figure 6. Spectrum of Responses to Scenario Question by Groups.

Most Urban SCC members were not aware of the SCC mandate, and in fact, were surprised when they were made aware of the Act, Regulations, and Policy regarding their role. They feel that their role, as prescribed for them by the historic and current practices played out in the school, is to fundraise.   Though Rural SCC members were more likely to respond as seeing themselves engaged in co-constructing the school level plan, there were comments made by

participants to suggest a general lack of understanding of the mandate of SCCs.

There is evidence to suggest that the collaboration and co-construction of the school level plan envisioned for SCCs is not consistently occurring, and most often not occurring - a sense that the mandate for SCCs is not being achieved.

Beliefs and Assumptions Impact on SCCs Achieving Their Mandate

The diverse responses received to the scenario question signals the importance of 'beliefs and assumptions' about parents and communities, and how these can either support SCCs to achieve their mandate, or impede their ability to do so. For example, some education partners' statements seem to indicate that they believe SCC parents/community members do not want to engage on the strategic plan, believing that they are not competent enough to understand the education jargon used in the plan development, and that SCC members just want to fundraise. It is also interesting to note how this interplays with those marginalized groups (e.g., Indigenous or newcomers) that new immigrants are not ready to discuss the strategic plan, for example, and comments that some SCCs are unable to get any Indigenous parents out.

> *"I think it is asking a lot of new immigrants to weigh in on strategic plan – they are not ready for it – it is too much for my newcomers."* **(Education Partners Group)**

> *"Unless SCC members are former teachers, administrators, learning coaches or reading, writing or math specialists, they have a difficult time giving their input on how schools should be teaching students."* **(Board Members/Directors Group)**

> *"I haven't found that the SCC can make that goal on their own – it is driven by the school administration."* **(Education Partners Group)**

> *"Many are comfortable with Admin. presenting the learning plan and they determine their means of support."* **(Board Members/Directors Group)**

If education partners, the holders of power in the system, do not believe parents and community members can contribute to student learning, then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby SCC members are not achieving their mandate. The reverse is also true in that the data demonstrates that where administrators and staff value the relationship with parents and the voice of parents, those SCC members are more likely to see themselves as engaged in the mandate of SCCs.

The positioning of parents that lives out in schools and the philosophical and pedagogical stances of staff may get in the way of the effectiveness of parent and community engagement, including the effectiveness of SCCs to carry out their mandate. The variety in how SCCs are deployed across Saskatchewan is very different, and often dependent on relationships.

The Key Role of the Principal

A common refrain in educational research emerges yet again in this evaluation – the critical role of the school principal. All groups identify the key role of the school principal in this work.

> *"The administrator is the key to getting towards a C. Our administrative team is 3 lovely people. The tone, attitude, acceptance of the principal to invite and engage community to be involved."*
> **(SCC member)**

Most often participants identify that this person sets the tone for relationship and expectations for the SCC mandate. The principal is applauded for when it works, and they are cited as the reason for the times it is not working. There is work to be done by the sector to set the expectations for school administrators to effectively engage SCCs in co-constructing the school level plan, and providing them with the knowledge, strategies, and supports to be successful in this endeavour.

Fundraising

In Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," the cat tells her. "I don't much care," Alice says. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," the cat replies. (Cited in Guskey, 2017, p. 32.) This story comes to mind when contemplating the fundraising saga in SCCs.

SCCs replaced a plethora of parent council type models in Saskatchewan that existed prior to forced school division amalgamations in 2006, including, local boards, school and community association, parent teacher associations, school councils – all with different compositions, mandates, and authority, but all sharing an interest in bringing community and school together. With the onset of SCCs, the Ministry of Education was deliberate and intentional to change the focus from fundraising to improving student achievement (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). Fundraising, though well intentioned and helpful to school staff, is not the mandate of SCCs as these actions have low impact on improving student achievement. It is the engagement of school staff and parents in the real work of schools – teaching and learning, where important gains can be realized in improving student achievement (Goodall, 2017; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Kirby & DiPaola, 2011).

It is clear through the data collected through this evaluation, that by and large, most SCCs are involved in some level of fundraising. In fact, most SCC members and staff feel that is their primary purpose. It is also clear that some like the fundraising aspect that occurs at SCCs, and others do not. One school division has made intentional efforts to focus the efforts of the SCC solely on the mandate and thereby separating out the fundraising activities. This is done by having the SCC meetings with a focused agenda on the mandate. When that meeting ends, it is followed by a 'Friends of the School Name' meeting, often with the same members, who then focus on fundraising efforts. It is an interesting and deliberate effort to focus SCCs on their mandate, while creating space for those interested in fundraising. In conversation with staff and SCC members from this school division, however, there

> *"Most are at the fundraising level and not creating plans. Recently an SCC shared a recent experience that they felt the staff treat them as intruders, that they are in the staff's space – and the SCC was not involved – people attributed that to the leadership in the school."*
> **(Education Partners Group)**

remain mixed feelings about this approach. Some feeling it is odd that they must conclude one meeting to have the other, and others who expressed some concern that the SCC meeting wasn't focused on the mandate. How does the education sector focus the efforts of SCCs on learning? Does the education sector draw the lines more clearly on this issue and disallow fundraising at SCCs, or create some space for this practice to occur in a manner that does not take away the focus on student learning?

When discussing this with the interpretation panel, there remains no agreement on this matter, some feeling it is a distraction from the mandate and misuse of the time and energy of SCCs, while others feeling it is inevitable and perhaps it is best to allow fundraising to occur. Beyond the concern that this perpetuates inequity in our schools for our children, based on privilege and wealth, (i.e. those who live in poor communities will not have the same opportunities as those who reside in middle to upper middle-class communities), it also distracts attention away from the clear mandate. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," the cat tells her. "I don't much care," Alice says. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," the cat replies. Knowing that parent and community engagement leads to improved student achievement, and having evidence to suggest that SCCs are not achieving their mandate in this regard, it seems that efforts should be taken to refocus SCCs on their mandate, as opposed to "it doesn't matter which way you go." If the destination is improved student achievement, then it does matter which way we go, and where the efforts of SCCs are focused.

Providing Adequate Supports, and Creating New Supports

There are some supports put in place by school divisions to support SCCs (e.g., handbook, technology, forums, professional development), but these are inconsistent across schools and school divisions. One example shared was a school division template to collect data from SCCs as a reporting requirement was not completed by many SCCs resulting in incomplete data. Some additional gaps identified were an awareness of the SCC mandate, a handbook with strategies to facilitate collaboration, and supports or templates for Principals and SCC Chairs as tools to facilitate their work. Technology limitations were also raised by some SCC members who expressed dissatisfaction with the technology supports that school divisions have made available to SCCs. Some suggestions made included better use of social media such as a SCC Facebook page, or utilizing a local community's social media presence for SCC purposes. Others described an interest in the SCC having greater control over the school division existing website page for SCCs, again noting deficiencies with current structures. The posting of SCC meeting minutes was offered as an example, where some schools handle this quite quickly, other schools are months behind posting SCC meeting minutes.

It is unknown if all school divisions in Saskatchewan provide a forum for SCCs to network with each other and engage with the board of education and senior administration, but where this exists, school division staff cite this as an effective practice, and SCC members express

appreciation for these forums. SCC members express a desire for these opportunities to include further time for networking and dialogue among SCCs so they can talk and share their experiences and identify effective practices that they can take back to their SCCs. Given that the data from this review suggests that SCCs are not focusing on their mandate, these types of forums may prove an effective structure to empower and re-focus the efforts of SCC members on their mandate. Formalizing a SCC division-wide structure, similar to other jurisdictions, was suggested by SCC members as a possible structure worth further exploration in Saskatchewan.

Making the School Community Council an Inviting Structure

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education 2010 SCC evaluation identified that SCC members felt the structure was too intimidating for parents, in particular the election process and the formality of the meeting procedures (e.g., motions, voting). This was discussed in this evaluation to determine if this sense of intimidation is still the case. There is a sense that the structure (perhaps even calling it School Community Council) is intimidating for parents, however, there is acknowledgement that this is the perception only until parents become part of the SCC, and then they do not feel it to be intimidating. Others expressed that it remains intimidating, particularly the elections and meeting formality, which precludes many parents. Participants expressed that SCCs do not engage those marginalized or otherwise disengaged in the community, and therefore SCCs are not fully representative of the community, particularly newcomers and Indigenous populations. Elections, meeting formality, and the education jargon used at SCC meetings were described as barriers. Through the course of the focus groups in this evaluation, participants came to the realization that these barriers are not imposed by the Act or Regulations of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, but rather that these 'norms' are school division and community driven – often based upon SCC constitution/bylaws or a school division handbook for SCCs, or even sometimes directed by a school principal or SCC Chair. School division staff, school staff, and SCCs control their structures, processes, and 'norms,' and SCCs can feel empowered to 'relax' the structure/formality if needed. The mandate of SCCs is to broadly engage staff, parents, and community to support student learning. They are a means to that end. If the SCC structure or formality gets in the way of this goal, then we're missing the point!

ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How can a SCC facilitate parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes? What are the characteristics of a SCC that is facilitating parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes?

While most participants in this evaluation identified with scenario B, it is clear from the comments of participants that a prerequisite for a SCC facilitating parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes is a belief by school staff in the value of parent and community voice in such endeavours. Led most often by the school principal, relationships built on trust between staff, parents, and community members is created whereby the progression of engagement of parents and community in the school level plan becomes achievable, and the norm. It is characterized by a focus on the SCC mandate (vision and goals of the school to improve student learning), by a collaborative and reciprocal relationship where the interests of the school staff and parents/community come together, and where the SCC is representative of the school community. Phrases such as "open," "willingness to listen," "good communication," "a connection with families," "to contribute, to help," were used to describe a SCC that can be "fun and engaging."

The data in this evaluation suggests that most SCCs are not aware of, nor are focused on, their mandate. Without an understanding of the mandate of SCCs by the principal and school staff, and a belief in the value of engaging parents and community in school planning and improvement processes, it is unlikely that a SCC will facilitate parent and community engagement in school planning and improvement processes. Without a clear picture of what this looks like, a principal and school staff are left as one participant described, "I don't even know what that would look like." A vision for improving student learning grounded in a strategy that centralizes engagement of school staff with youth, parents, and community members, grounded in beliefs and practices that align with this vision, is required. Clearly boards of education play an important role in setting the expectation for this and establishing the supports for such a strategy to be successful.

What supports, considerations, or other critical elements are important for schools, school divisions, and the various education partners in the province to attend to, in order to assist SCCs in implementing their mandate?

As with any strategy, coordination and alignment of efforts is necessary for success. In the case of SCCs, many partners throughout the education sector play important roles to create success for SCCs. These are further delineated in the recommendations.

How do the roles of Boards of Education and SCCs inter-relate? What role may SCCs play in major education initiatives in Saskatchewan such as the Education Sector Strategic Plan, or reconciliation?

This question received limited discussion, however, the evaluation confirms that school board members have an interest in connecting with SCCs, and SCC members desire a relationship, and engagement, with school board members. There is inconsistency in how this is practiced, as confirmed by both school board members and SCC members noting that in some instances this relationship is well established, and in other instances, not at all. If the mandate of SCCs is to provide advice to the board of education, then a relationship and practices must be put in place to enable this to occur. There is a risk that SCCs can become cynical of school board efforts to engage SCCs only in matters of interest to the school board, (i.e. campaigns to support education funding, or local governance of education) if the relationship between school boards and SCCs is not reciprocal and meaningful beyond such efforts. School principals play a meaningful role in this relationship as one SCC member expressed - "if the SCC feels the Principal values and listens to SCC voices, SCC members then feel the Board is responsive and aware. If the Principal doesn't value the SCC, the SCC members do not feel the Board values them."

It was also of note that in at least two instances in this evaluation, school board members expressed that their interest in pursuing trusteeship began through their involvement as a SCC member. An outcome of SCCs, outlined in the SCC Logic Model (see Figure 1) is citizenship and engagement in the public education system. These experiences demonstrate that this outcome is achievable.

What is the educational and social significance of well-functioning SCCs that are achieving their mandate?

In Saskatchewan, as across Canada, there is an expectation, grounded in legislation, for the engagement of youth, parents and community members collaboratively working alongside school staff to support improved student learning. This undoubtedly comes from a belief in the need for the voice of parents and community within public education, and is solidified in five decades of educational research in parent and community engagement in schools (Mapp, 2013). To move the dial on improved student achievement, particularly with Indigenous and vulnerable students, the engagement of parents and community members is required. SCCs are structures created with a mandate for this very reason, and a well-functioning SCC built on relationships of trust between school staff, parents and community members are a means to that goal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: That every school in Saskatchewan adopt community education philosophy and practices, to create an environment in which SCCs can thrive, and communities can be engaged.

Harkening back to a similar recommendation from nearly 20 years ago for the provincial education system (Tymchak, 2001), it is imperative that this foundation be in place to facilitate SCCs achieving their mandate.

1.1 That boards of education create a mandate for all schools to establish and sustain a school culture that is welcoming and inclusive to parents and community, and annually conduct assessments of such by parents and community members to determine such.
1.2 That boards of education engage school staff and SCCs in ongoing professional development opportunities focused on community education philosophy and practices.
1.3 That school division recruitment and selection practices be reviewed to ensure the processes adequately attract and reward candidates who value youth, parent and community engagement, and whose practices demonstrates such.
1.4 That SCCs review their member election process and meeting structure, to determine if any of these formalities are impediments to the engagement of parents and community members, particularly for Indigenous and newcomers. If any are found, SCCs are encouraged to revise their bylaws and meeting practices as necessary, to create a more inviting, inclusive, and representative structure.

Recommendation 2: That SCCs focus on their mandate to support improved student achievement.

SCCs are most often unaware of their mandate. An intentional and consistent approach is required to ensure school staff and SCCs are aware of their mandate and are directing their precious energy to that end.

2.1 That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and boards of education launch a communication strategy for the provincial Pre-K – 12 education sector, including SCCs, parents, and communities, that clarifies the purpose of SCCs and their mandate.
2.2 That boards of education review, and revise as necessary, their SCC resources and supports to ensure they are grounded in, and aligned with, the mandate of SCCs.
2.3 That boards of education provide ongoing professional development opportunities for school staff and SCCs that focuses on their mandate to support improved student achievement.

2.4 That fundraising not be permitted within SCCs to ensure SCCs are focused on their mandate. Where parents express an interest in fundraising, that school divisions create a separate structure (e.g., 'Friends of the School Name') for such purposes, and that this structure comply with financial accountability practices and operate within the set controls of the board of education.

Recommendation 3: That education partners in Saskatchewan provide adequate supports and create new supports for SCCs.

Education partners do provide supports for SCCs, however, gaps were identified in this evaluation. Other jurisdictions' supports and models may serve as potential examples to enhance SCCs in Saskatchewan. SCCs and school staff must be provided with adequate supports to optimize their effectiveness.

3.1 That the SSBA, in conjunction with LEADS, update and revise its existing resource, *School community councils: A handbook for School Community Councils and Principals,* in a fashion similar to the Council of Ontario's Directors of Education parent engagement guidebook, to more effectively provide SCCs and school staff with the strategies, tools, and supports to focus on their mandate.

3.2 That education partners jointly develop and implement a strategy to support school principals to carry out their leadership role with SCCs.

3.3 That boards of education and SCCs review the school division existing supports for SCCs (e.g., technology, templates, handbook, etc.) to ensure they are functionally meeting the needs of SCCs to effectively carry out their mandate. That these existing supports be updated and/or new supports be created as required.

3.4 That boards of education be encouraged to formalize a division-wide SCC body comprising at least one representative from each SCC in the school division. That this body be co-chaired by the Chair of the board of education, and by an SCC representative appointed or elected from the body. That the structure provides a forum for networking amongst SCCs, to focus on the mandate of SCCs, and for ongoing professional development to assist SCCs to focus on their mandate. Most importantly, that this body provide advice to the board of education on improving student achievement, and facilitate networking between school board members, senior school division officials, and SCCs.

Recommendation 4: That the education sector prioritize youth, parent, and community engagement as a foundation of Saskatchewan's Pre-K – 12 education system and hold itself accountable to this end.

This evaluation has highlighted a shared desire of SCCs and education partners in Saskatchewan for the engagement of youth, parents and community in schools. Steps can be taken to move this desire to action as a foundation in Saskatchewan's Pre-K – 12 education system, from the SCC and beyond.

4.1 That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education prioritize youth, parent, and community engagement in its vision for education and subsequent strategic plan for the sector. That this strategy effectively enlists SCCs in a meaningful way, and create the expectations for schools to facilitate multiple means of engagement for youth, parents, and community – both within the SCC and with the school in general. That the plan be monitored for evidence towards this end. That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education establish a Parent Engagement Office to coordinate these efforts.

4.2 That the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and boards of education advocate to post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan with teacher education programs, to develop required classes/curricula to support teacher candidates to be more familiar with engaging youth, parents, and community in support of student learning. That graduate-level programs similarly foster educational leadership towards this end.

4.3 That education partners advocate to the Saskatchewan Professional Teachers Regulatory Board to revise its academic requirements for teacher certification to include a required class in youth, parent, and community engagement as described in recommendation 4.2.

4.4 That SCCs conduct an annual self-evaluation to determine their ongoing effectiveness in achieving their mandate. That they communicate these results to their communities, as well as the board of education. That the SSBA develop a template to support the self-evaluation process.

CONCLUSION

Summary

This evaluation provided the opportunity to hear directly from those connected to SCCs in Saskatchewan, in a variety of roles. Through the generosity of their time, participants in this study have provided the education sector in Saskatchewan with significant insights into the current state of SCCs, and a window into what a renewed focus on SCCs could be. The evidence strongly suggests that after more than a decade in existence, SCCs are not achieving their mandate, and we see only "random acts of parent engagement" (Weiss, Lopez & Rosenberg, 2010) occurring. When asked in the course of this evaluation if SCCs matter, however, there was an overwhelming response by all groups that yes, SCCs matter. It is important for the education system to connect with parents and community, and SCCs can facilitate this.

If the lofty outcomes envisioned for SCCs as outlined in the SCC Logic Model (see Figure 1) remain, and are to be realized, then it is time to pause and hit the reset button on SCCs. Without an intentional and consistent approach to the inputs and outputs required to create success for SCCs, it is unrealistic to expect SCCs to achieve the short, medium, and long-term outcomes envisioned, particularly when many SCC members are unaware of their mandate. A renewal of efforts through a strategic focus and systematic plan to raise awareness of the mandate of SCCs and focus efforts to that end will set the course for SCCs for years to come. Guided by a shared belief in the education sector of the value of parent and community engagement in improved student learning, and built upon relationships of trust between school staff, parents and community, SCCs can be set up for success to achieve their mandate.

The findings and recommendations from this learning-oriented evaluation are intended to provide SCCs and education partners in Saskatchewan with the research upon which they can draw to form conclusions about the benefits and successes of SCCs, and serve as a guide towards their renewal. The engagement of parents and community in schools is vital to improve student learning, and schools must create multiple pathways and opportunities for this engagement - SCCs being one of these important opportunities. It is acknowledged that educational policy is not created in a vacuum, and the engagement of parents and communities, including First Nations, Métis, and newcomers, is subject to the political interests and context of those who hold power. It is hoped that this study has shed light on the significance of parent and community engagement in schools, and will lead education partners to strengthening the position of parents on the school landscape in a more consistent and systematic fashion, ultimately leading to improved educational and social outcomes for students and families in the province of Saskatchewan.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A – Research Groups Questions

Research Sharing-Circles Questions: National Congress on Rural Education and Focus Group of SCC Urban Members

1. Based on the following scenarios (copies provided in writing to participants), please select the one that most closely reflects the practices at your School Community Council (SCC) as it relates to the SCC mandate to "develop and recommend to its Board of Education for approval a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan."
   a. To my knowledge, we do not develop and recommend a school level plan, nor do we receive updates on the progress of the plan, or receive any data to determine the effectiveness of the school level plan on student achievement at my school. The SCC is not aware of their mandate to develop and recommend to the Board of Education for approval, a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan.
   b. A school level plan is created by the school principal and staff, and is taken to the SCC for their approval. There is limited discussion with the SCC on the substance of the school level plan, nor is there an opportunity for the SCC to provide input into, or change, the school level plan presented by the principal and/or school staff. An update on the school level plan may be provided to the SCC by the principal and/or school staff, however there is no opportunity to review school level data on student achievement, or an opportunity for the SCC to dialogue and provide feedback and direction regarding the school level plan progress throughout the year. There is a sense by the SCC members that the school level plan is owned by the principal and/or the school staff.
   c. A school level plan that aligns with the school division's strategic plan is created by the SCC members with the principal and/or school staff. This is done through a process whereby SCC members, the principal, and school staff contribute to the plan's development by sharing their ideas. The principal and/or school staff bring regular updates to the SCC with data related to the school level plan. The SCC reviews the data and has an opportunity to discuss the progress of the school level plan, and/or participate in a dialogue to chart any revisions to the plan if results are not being achieved. There is a sense by the SCC, the principal, and school staff that "we all own the school level plan."
2. If you have selected scenario "c" above, describe the characteristics of your SCC (what your SCC looks like, sounds like, feels like) that creates the opportunity for that level of

partnership. If you have selected scenario "a" or "b", describe the characteristics of your SCC and what may need to change in order to move towards the conditions described in scenario "c."

3. The primary mandate of a SCC is to facilitate parent and community engagement in the school towards improving student achievement. How does your SCC do this? How might your SCC do this better? What supports do you receive from the school, school division, and/or others that helps you achieve your mandate? What supports do you require from the school, school division, and/or others that you are not currently receiving, that you believe would help your SCC achieve its mandate?

4. Please participate in table discussions to share one effective practice that your SCC does that you believe helps you to achieve your mandate of engaging parent and community members in the school.

5. Why did you join the SCC? Why do you think a SCC is important?

6. The Board of Education and a SCC have different roles, however they do inter-relate with each other. What is your experience with connecting the work of the SCC with the Board of Education? Is there a role for the SCC to engage with the Board of Education in some way on major education initiatives or projects in the school division – school division planning, or Reconciliation as examples? If so, what might that look like, and how might that work?

7. Your feedback is important as the SSBA conducts a review of SCCs. Do you have any other comments you wish to make regarding your experience with a SCC that you think are important for including in a review of SCCs?

Research Sharing-Circles Questions: School Board Members and Directors of Education at the Saskatchewan School Boards Association Spring Assembly

1. The following scenarios are being shared with School Community Council (SCC) members as part of the process for the review of SCCs in accordance with the 2016 SSBA adopted resolution. Based on your understanding of SCCs in your school division, which scenario do you think the SCC members in your school division will identify with as it relates to the SCC mandate to "develop a recommend to its Board of Education for approval a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan"?
   a. To my knowledge, we do not develop and recommend a school level plan, nor do we receive updates on the progress of the plan, or receive any data to determine the effectiveness of the school level plan on student achievement at my school. The SCC is not aware of their mandate to develop and recommend to the Board of Education for approval, a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan.
   b. A school level plan is created by the school principal and staff, and is taken to the SCC for their approval. There is limited discussion with the SCC on the substance of the school level plan, nor is there an opportunity for the SCC to provide input

     into, or change, the school level plan presented by the principal and/or school staff. An update on the school level plan may be provided to the SCC by the principal and/or school staff, however there is no opportunity to review school level data on student achievement, or an opportunity for the SCC to dialogue and provide feedback and direction regarding the school level plan progress throughout the year. There is a sense by the SCC members that the school level plan is owned by the principal and/or the school staff.

    c. A school level plan that aligns with the school division's strategic plan is created by the SCC members with the principal and/or school staff. This is done through a process whereby SCC members, the principal, and school staff can contribute to the plan's development by sharing their ideas. The principal and/or school staff bring regular updates to the SCC with data related to the school level plan. The SCC reviews the data and has an opportunity to discuss the progress of the school level plan, and/or participate in a dialogue to chart any revisions to the plan if results are not being achieved. There is a sense by the SCC, the principal, and school staff that "we all own the school level plan".

2. As you see it, describe the characteristics of an SCC (what it looks like, sounds like, feels like) that creates the opportunity for the level of partnership described in scenario "c". What might get in the way of scenario "c" being realized?

3. The primary mandate of a SCC is to facilitate parent and community engagement in the school towards improving student achievement. How does your Board of Education or school division help SCCs accomplish this? What supports (practices, processes, resources) does your Board of Education or school division provide to SCCs that help them achieve their mandate? From your perspective, are these working or adequate, and are there other supports that might be required? Do you have the supports you need as a Board of Education or school division to enable you to provide the necessary supports to SCCs so they can achieve their mandate? From your perspective are these supports adequate and working, or are there other supports that you require?

4. Please participate in table discussions to share one effective practice that your Board of Education or school division does that you believe helps SCCs to achieve their mandate of engaging parent and community members in the school.

5. Based on your understanding of the mandate of SCC as well as your experiences with SCCs, do SCCs work? Why or why not? Do SCCs matter, and are they important? Why or why not?

6. The Board of Education and SCCs have different roles, however they do inter-relate with each other. What is your experience with connecting the work of the Board of Education with SCCs? Is there a role for the Board of Education to engage with SCCs in some way on major education initiatives or projects in the school division – school division planning, advocacy, or Reconciliation as examples? If so, what might that look like, and how might that work?

7. Your feedback is important as the SSBA conducts a review of SCCs. Do you have any other comments you wish to make regarding your experience with a SCC that you think

are important for including in a review of SCCs?

Focus Group Questions: SASBO, SSBA, LEADS, STF, and Ministry of Education

1. Based on your experiences with School Community Councils (SCCs), from the following scenarios, please select the one that most closely reflects your experiences with the practices at SCCs as it relates to their mandate to "develop a recommend to its Board of Education for approval a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan".
    a. To my knowledge, we do not develop and recommend a school level plan, nor do we receive updates on the progress of the plan, or receive any data to determine the effectiveness of the school level plan on student achievement at my school. The SCC is not aware of their mandate to develop and recommend to the Board of Education for approval, a school level plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan.
    b. A school level plan is created by the school principal and staff, and is taken to the SCC for their approval. There is limited discussion with the SCC on the substance of the school level plan, nor is there an opportunity for the SCC to provide input into, or change, the school level plan presented by the principal and/or school staff. An update on the school level plan may be provided to the SCC by the principal and/or school staff, however there is no opportunity to review school level data on student achievement, or an opportunity for the SCC to dialogue and provide feedback and direction regarding the school level plan progress throughout the year. There is a sense by the SCC members that the school level plan is owned by the principal and/or the school staff.
    c. A school level plan that aligns with the school division's strategic plan is created by the SCC members with the principal and/or school staff. This is done through a process whereby SCC members, the principal, and school staff can contribute to the plan's development by sharing their ideas. The principal and/or school staff bring regular updates to the SCC with data related to the school level plan. The SCC reviews the data and has an opportunity to discuss the progress of the school level plan, and/or participate in a dialogue to chart any revisions to the plan if results are not being achieved. There is a sense by the SCC, the principal, and school staff that "we all own the school level plan".
2. As you see it, describe the characteristics of an SCC (what it looks like, sounds like, feels like) that creates the opportunity for the level of partnership described in scenario "c". What might get in the way of scenario "c" being realized?
3. In an evaluation of SCCs done by the Ministry of Education in 2011, there was evidence that some SCC members feel "intimidated" by the SCC and that the processes were to "business-like" for their comfort level. Based on your experiences with SCCs, are those comments still accurate? If they are accurate, why is this, and what can be done to shift SCCs to more of a partnership model of school staff, parents and community working

together? If they are no longer accurate, why is this, and what do you believe has contributed to this change?

4. The primary mandate of a SCC is to facilitate parent and community engagement in the school towards improving student achievement. How do Boards of Education, school divisions, or other education partners help SCCs accomplish this? What supports (practices, processes, resources) are you aware of that Boards of Education, school divisions, or other education partners provide to SCCs that help them achieve their mandate? From your perspective, are these working or adequate, and are there other supports that might be required? Do you have the supports you need in whatever role you interact with SCCs to enable you to provide the necessary supports to SCCs so they can achieve their mandate? From your perspective are these supports adequate and working, or are there other supports that you require?

5. Please identify one effective practice that you are aware of that is helping SCCs to achieve their mandate of engaging parent and community members in the school.

6. Based on your understanding of the mandate of SCC as well as your experiences with SCCs, do SCCs work? Why or why not? Do SCCs matter, and are they important? Why or why not?

7. The Board of Education and SCCs have different roles, however they do inter-relate with each other. Do you have an example of how a Board of Education is effectively connecting or aligning the work of the Board with SCCs? Is there a role for Boards of Education to engage with SCCs in some way on major education initiatives or projects in the school division – school division planning, advocacy, or Reconciliation as examples? If so, what might that look like, and how might that work?

8. Your feedback is important as the SSBA conducts a review of SCCs. Do you have any other comments you wish to make regarding your experience with SCCs that you think are important for including in a review of SCCs?