

Developing Partners in Education

Part of a series of mini discussion papers prepared for the Education Partnership Table to permit wide input to the direction of education in Ontario.

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The Ministry of Education has been striving for a new relationship among all the groups that make up the publicly funded education sector that is based on the “new three R’s”: Respect, Responsibility, and Results. There should be common respect, mutual responsibility-taking and agreement about results: in other words a real partnership. While the word “partnership” has been much in use before, genuinely creating a partnership to replace prior years of conflict requires substantial change that does not take place easily or without groundwork. This paper is one of several setting out proposed government policy changes to ensure that the conditions exist for such a partnership to thrive.

Ontario Parent Involvement Policy

SUMMARY

Parents play a vital role in the development and education of their children and in the success of schools. The Ministry of Education appreciates that the needs and contributions of parents have been undervalued and the education system needs to create several new points of reinforcement in order for the “parent factor” to realize its potential. The Ministry’s ambitions for increased student success make this advance not only desirable but necessary.

A new provincial Parent Involvement Policy will recognize effective parent involvement as a new performance measure to be expected of the publicly funded education system. It lays out requirements for the Minister of Education, the Ministry, school

boards, schools, and their staffs to contribute to successful outcomes.

The main thrust is an onus on decision-makers to create the conditions for parents’ engagement in their children’s education to take place by way of the right environment, supports, and attitudes. For the first time, parent groups will be provided with exclusive or joint control over new vehicles and resources that will act as reinforcement for a shift to the full welcoming of parents in the system. Included will be resources to help develop involvement from the full diversity of parents. Training for parent mobilization will be provided across the system, from parents themselves, right through to supervisory officers and Ministry staff. Together, these measures will effectively “set the table” for parents to more fully participate.

Ultimately, however, it will be the interest and energy of parents themselves that will make the parent involvement policy succeed.

The new parent vehicles will ultimately need to be accountable to parents through democratic processes. Special appointments may be needed to ensure diversity while school councils strive to be more fully representative of the broad parent community.

Most of the effort and resources supporting the policy will reflect parents' own interest to have some influence over conditions at their children's schools. It is proposed that the existing vehicle of school councils be made more flexible to accommodate parents' interests, but the main focus is on improving the dynamics of how school councils work. A special provincial committee of parents and principals will be asked to address mutual issues at the school level including the use of mediation to resolve disputes.

New board, regional and provincial mechanisms will ensure that the parent voice is taken seriously at all levels, and that parents are linked across the province.

INTRODUCTION - PARENT VOICE IN EDUCATION PROJECT

Last December, a group of parent leaders from around the province were constituted by the Minister as the *Parent Voice in Education Project*. Members were given the tasks of devising an effective provincial voice for parents and recommending the provincial assistance required to greatly improve the number of parents active in education. The group consulted widely with other Ontario parents and completed its report in April.

The Parent Voice report affirmed that parents do not want to run schools, but they do want to have a voice that they can be assured will be taken into account at the school, board, and provincial levels. While there are many examples of successful parent engagement in Ontario today, many parents still perceive inadequate respect, and feel they are not taken seriously.

In response to the Parent Voice recommendations, the Ministry is bringing forward a comprehensive Parent Involvement Policy to increase parent involvement with their children's education, with their school, and with the education system. In keeping with the recommendations, the Parent Involvement Policy is focused on how to improve the dynamics within the system to overcome barriers, anticipate the potential issues, and foster new attitudes about healthy levels of parent engagement.

The reasons for a genuine partnership with parents are self evident. Parents are the most important influence in child's life outside of school, and this is also true for a child's education. Long after direct learning from parents in a child's early years gives way to formal education, parents continue to play a key role in student success through the attitudes they help to shape and the direct supports they provide.

Good schools are better where there is a stronger connection with parents as part of the learning community. In fact, one of best means of nurturing parental involvement at the secondary level is to bring the family and school closer together by creating a genuine partnership between the two. Research shows that positive results can include improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, better behaviour, and restored confidence among parents in their children's schooling. The government views enhancing

the role of parents as an important and practical consideration and as an important part of building the capacity of schools to help students achieve.

The ongoing confidence of parents, not only in local schools, but also in publicly funded education, is an important objective. Over the last decade unmet parent concerns about publicly funded education contributed to a 50% increase in those who moved their children to private schools.

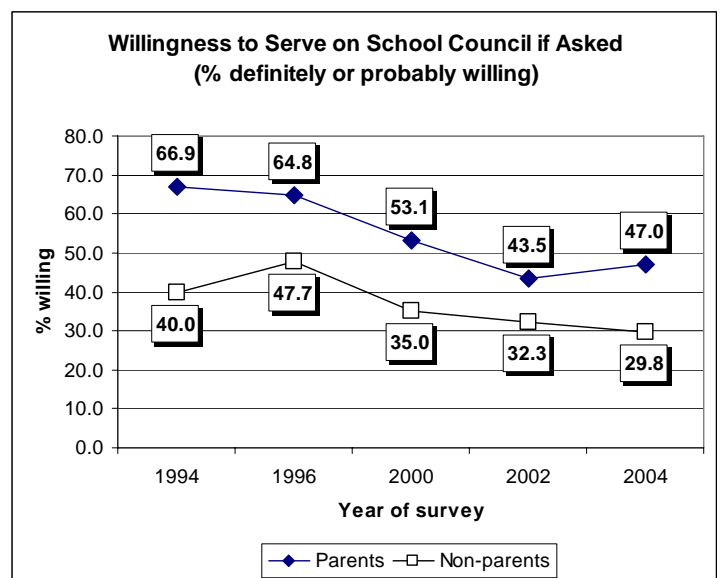
There are an estimated 2.3 million parents of students in publicly funded education, who make up both a formidable potential resource and the largest single “constituency” for publicly funded education. According to one survey, just 11% of parents consider themselves active at schools, while another survey indicates nearly half would become involved if asked.

The busy lives all parents lead today means that it is more challenging to become involved. We know parents today are no less concerned for their children, but there may now also be less of a culture of involvement than there once was. Education itself has become more specialized and therefore may seem to parents more insular. In order for these difficulties to be overcome new approaches and supports will need to be put into place.

While there is general agreement within education that parents have an obvious contribution to make from their close and valid perspective on the system, consideration of this policy also recognizes that there are also underlying resistances. Some resistances arise from the lack of resources in the system in previous years, concerns about “parent agendas” overwhelming the main education agenda, lack of training for new staff, and increasing

references to a small number of “problem” or “super” parents.

While the main beneficiaries will be students, the Ministry of Education also believes that a proper parent involvement program will be a tremendous asset to the education system with benefits for teachers, principals, supervisory officials, directors, ministry officials, and the public. The mediating presence of organized parents is a welcome development at schools. Proactive measures are far more effective for modern public services than is simply reacting to complaints or problems as they arise.



Source: OISE/UT Survey of Educational Issues

PARENT INVOLVEMENT POLICY

Policy

Parent involvement includes a range of activities from good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board or provincial committees, communicating and meeting with teachers, and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips.

The province will make the successful involvement of parents one of the provincial outcomes expected of schools boards. Success in engaging parents will be embedded in the public performance measures and evaluations at all levels in education. All parents will be asked to become involved to some extent, and organized parents will be given a direct say over parent related resources. Please see expected outcomes in Appendix I.

Parent Voice Empowerment

The Minister of Education will undertake annual regional forums with parents to listen and converse about parent concerns.

New communications for parents will be developed at the provincial, board, and local levels, including a Parent Portal on the web with concise and authoritative information, an expanded e-network to provide updates and receive feedback, and a new parent handbook.

Parents will get greater access to high quality, understandable, and timely information about education initiatives at the provincial, board, and school level.

It is proposed that all necessary legal steps be taken to transform the pre-existing Minister-appointed parent council into a Provincial Parent Board, selected by parents, to represent parents and guide provincial efforts to mobilize parents. The Board will initially be selected by parent nominators, but will make a rapid transition to election by parents.

A provincial Office of Parent Engagement will be established to support provincial efforts, and Ministry Regional Offices will assume a role in supporting parent engagement.

School boards will be required to establish Parent Involvement Committees with a direct link to the Director and Trustees, to provide parent advice and to support parent engagement. Base provincial funding to support the work of the committee will be provided, and additional funding scaled to the size of the board.

Elected school boards play a vital role in representing and communicating with parents and the broader community. Their knowledge and expertise will be instrumental in leading the transition to a stronger parent involvement policy.

Ongoing support will be made available to provincial parent organizations that are able to enhance parent involvement.

A provincial fund will support projects that enhance parent involvement at a provincial or regional level.

Francophone parents will continue to be involved in the implementation of the Aménagement linguistique policy, a major commitment to make French-language schools the cultural hubs of their communities.

The Ministry and school boards will work together to ensure broad parent consultation takes place on relevant new policies, particularly those which directly impact family life. Some progress has already been made in this respect in areas such as school closures.

A Welcoming Environment for Parents

Research shows that parents will participate more freely in a welcoming environment. To help make this welcoming environment, schools can include practising better school-family communication: taking care with messages sent to parents, dealing with

parent issues, and inviting parents to participate.

A school council outreach program for parents will be funded with a base amount to each school council help to cover costs. A grant program will be available for special initiatives at schools around the province.

Provincial and board assistance will be available to relieve some of the burden on principals for parent development. Parent involvement training will be provided to parents, teachers, principals, supervisory officers, and ministry officials.

School councils will be asked to focus on engaging parents and fostering parental involvement within their school community as a key factor in assisting student achievement. Schools councils will be encouraged to broaden opportunities for parents, and to recognize active members among the parent community. School councils will also be asked to help recognize parent and community volunteers and to report on levels of parent engagement.

School councils will be provided with the flexibility to associate with related not-for-profit organizations, and to vary their structures where that conforms with the wishes of a majority of parents. Community-use-of-school agreements will specifically include preferred access for a variety of parent groups.

The Office of Parent Engagement will work with the Board of Parents to establish provincial standards of excellence for parent engagement and recognition programs.

A special principals' and parents' project team will be established by the Minister to provide advice on a range of issues such as

Appendix I : OUTCOMES

the use of mediation to resolve disputes and best practices for parent - school relationships.

A fundraising policy will guarantee school councils control over funds raised and limit fundraising by ensuring education essentials are provided by the system, allowing parents to focus on supporting student success.

It must be noted that surveys indicate that the most important relationship for parents within the school system - the one with their child's teacher - is also one of the most successful. Parents report high levels of satisfaction with the access provided and information received from their child's classroom teacher. At the same time, dealing with parents is high on the list of challenges for new teachers, and professional development in this regard will be part of the New Teacher Induction Program for beginning teachers.

Addressing Diversity

The provincial grant program will be available to school councils for initiatives to reach parents who may find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system, or other factors.

The Provincial Parent Board and school board Parent Involvement Committees will be supplemented with appointments to ensure representation of diverse parents until the development of local school councils has sufficiently progressed.

All parent vehicles will be asked to report annually on the effectiveness of measures to develop full representation.

The Minister will also hold direct forums with diverse communities to encourage their full engagement within the system.

Ministry

Responsiveness as evaluated by a Provincial Parent Board

- Consultation of parents on relevant policy
- Support for parent engagement
- Information transparency
- Communication responsiveness
- Boards combined parent engagement

School Boards

Responsiveness as evaluated by a board Parent Involvement Committee

- Consultation of parents on relevant policy
- Support for parent engagement
- Information transparency
- Communication responsiveness
- Combined school / parent engagement

Schools

Participation of parents as measured by local School Council

- Vitality of school council: parents voting, number of parents on committees, parents as active members, accomplishments
- Contribution to student success
- Survey of parents – parent welcome, information and communication
- Attendance at parent-teacher meetings, school events, return of report cards
- School volunteerism – hours contributed, persons engaged, accomplishments

Appendix II: SUMMARY OF NEW PROVINCIAL SUPPORTS/RESOURCES

Ministry

Confirmed Parent seats at provincial Education Partnership Table
New Parent Board
Office of Parent Engagement
Support for Parent Board
Training
Grants for Provincial and regional projects
Research
Regional Office Support for Parent Groups
Minister's Parent Forums
Assistance with regional parent conferences
Training for Ministry staff
Performance standard for Deputy Minister and key staff
Base funding for provincial parent organizations.
Policy of Fundraising limits
Principal Parent Committee – jointly examine issues of mutual Interest
Aménagement linguistique Parent and Community Involvement working committee (francophone)
Parent web Portal of convenient authoritative information
Interactive e-network on education developments
Hotlines for homework, bullying

School Boards

Parent Involvement Committee
Provincial funding to support
District Meetings and inter-school council communication
Training for supervisory officials and trustees
Performance standard for Director, Supervisory Officials

Schools

Base grant for school councils – for local communication and engagement activities
Grants for parent engagement projects
Training in parent interaction for principals and teachers
More flexibility for school councils
Performance standard for principals and teachers

Investing in Parent Involvement

Component of the Ontario Parent Involvement Policy	Investments	Amount	Total
Local	New provincial grant program being made available to school councils for school-based initiatives to reach parents who may find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system, or other factors.	\$1,000,000	
	New base mobilization and outreach budget for school councils to support local communication and engagement efforts (\$500 per school)	\$2,400,000	\$3,400,000
Board and regional	New base provincial funding to support the work of the Parent Involvement Committee to be established at the school board level: district meetings and inter-school communication (\$5,000 per school board + \$0.17 per student)	\$717,000	
	New provincial fund to support provincial and regional projects aimed at enhancing parent involvement.	\$750,000	\$1,467,000
Provincial	Funding to provincial parent organizations that are able to enhance parent involvement, including an inflation adjustment	\$60,000	
	Provincial Parent Engagement Office	\$250,000	\$310,000
Total cost			\$5,177,000