

Active Parent Advisory Council Members: Who are They?

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OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES, British Columbia has legislated to provide for increasing levels of involvement by parents in the educational affairs of public schools. The ends which policy-makers seek through parental involvement via parent councils have been described as either to democratize school systems (Coulter, 1998), to raise achievement, attendance, and graduation rates (Chicago School Reform Act, 1988), or to make schools more responsive (Hess, 1999). Whichever one or combination of these ends is sought, the social composition of parent councils seems to be critical to its achievement. Parent councils need to reflect the social composition of public schools themselves.

Because all parents in British Columbia are, in law, members of parent councils (PACs), the School Act gives no guidance with respect to their composition. The affairs of the council, however, are conducted by elected officers, collectively called the Executive. These officers and other parents who become active by attending meetings, are effectively the PAC. Not all parents become involved.

Legislation is not always silent on the composition of parent councils in all educational jurisdictions. In New Zealand, for instance, the Education Act specifies that the membership of *boards of trustees* (school councils with a majority of parents) should reflect both ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the student body of the school, as well as the fifty-fifty gender balance which exists in the population in New Zealand (Education Act, 1989, s.99). In England concern about the composition of school governors has a different focus. The 1986 Education

(No 2) Act provides specifically for more representatives from the business sector (Thody, 1989, pp. 144, 139).

Attention has also been drawn to the fact that, internationally, there are several outstanding issues which are relevant to the social composition of parent/community councils or boards (Verhoeven & Heddegem, 1999, p. 416). In England, several of these issues centre on the degree of representation of the different social groups. A governor of a school in England was likely to be an educated, white, middle-class woman, although she was less well represented in the secondary school than she is in the elementary school and less likely to be the chair (Golby, 1992). Also, while there was higher than would be expected representation of educators and individuals with fairly high incomes and education levels among school governors, the semi-skilled and unskilled worker were under-represented (Thody, 1998). In fact, social class, ethnicity, and gender were reported as responsible for tensions between governors and educational professionals (Deem & Brehony, 1992: 76). By contrast to some of the above, Verhoeven and Heddegem (1999, p.420) reported that in Belgium males predominate on parent councils (61%).

Since there is no legislative guidance respecting the composition of parent councils in British Columbia, and in the light of the importance of social composition to the achievement of the expressed ends, there is need for investigation. The evidence we examine below addresses one major question: who are the members of parent councils? More specifically, what patterns exist with respect to their gender, age, educational backgrounds, level of employment, ethnicity, and levels of annual income. The answer to this question seems especially important because schools in British Columbia are increasingly becoming socially and culturally more diverse.

These results will have implications not only for policy-making and legislation, but also for principals and teacher-leaders in schools who work with these councils.

Demographic data reported here were collected in 1998 as part of a larger survey of parents (N=364) who were active members of parent advisory councils (PACs) in 2 school districts in British Columbia: one urban and the other semi-rural. Of these, 161 were members of the Executive, and the others (177) were parents, without an official role, who attended PAC meetings. Of these executives, just under a half (47%) reported that they were elected to the PAC; 25% that they were nominated; 4% that they were appointed, and 24% that they were acclaimed. While 19% of all 364 active participants were also on other public boards (e.g. hospital or library), a greater percentage of the members of the Executive (28%) were also on other public boards. Approximately 70% of the sample had children in K-7 schools. The questionnaire used in the survey was distributed at PAC meetings by their chairpersons.

The analysis of the results revealed that most of the PAC members were married (90%) women (92%), who were neither aboriginals (98%) nor members of a visible minority (96%) — apparently white, and were between the ages of 35 and 54 (84%). Only 14% were younger than 34, and 2% older than 54 years of age. BC Stats data reveal that in 1998 there were 50.27% women and 49.73% men. The under-representation of men, aboriginals, and visible minorities is patently clear and raises the important question about the significance of this under-representation for the schools.¹

There was more balance with respect to the highest level of educational achievement by members of the PACs: 36% had university degrees, 29% had college or vocational diplomas, and 29% had only high school certificates. This balance, however, does not reflect the reality in

¹ BC Stats data reveal that in 1998 50.27% of the BC population was female and 49.7% male. Data from the same source (2003) reveal that in 2001 visible minorities and aboriginals made up 26% and 6%, respectively, of the BC population.

British Columbia. A year earlier only 14% of British Columbians was reported to have a university education, 15% trades qualification, 15% college education, and 53% high school (Statistics Canada, 1996). Parents on the Executive had the highest level of education (47% with degrees and 63% with either college or degrees. It was expected that all levels of employment would be represented, but the percentage of the unemployed category fell below provincial norms. While our results revealed that 58% held full- and part-time jobs and 30% were homemakers, only 3.1% reported that they were unemployed. BCStats (2005) reveals that the unemployment rate in 1998 was 8.8% and the employment rate, 59.2%. While homemakers made up the single largest group they did not significantly outnumber full- and part-time workers.

It was not surprising that all salary categories were reasonably well represented, but the single largest number (27%) reported a 1997 annual family income of between \$50,000 and \$69,000. The corresponding median family income reported for each of the districts was \$56,975 (urban) and \$37,881 (semi-rural). One note of interest is that parents from the under \$20,000 group were over-represented on the Executive (10% in the sample versus 7.3% in the populations.)

In conclusion, the evidence presented here raises questions about the inclusiveness of PACs. Men, visible minorities, aboriginals, parents from lower income groups, the unemployed and the less educated appear not to be proportionately and actively involved in these councils. What does it mean for the education of children in British Columbia today?

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Table 1: Summary of demographic data on active PAC members by district and total

| Gender | Urban | | Semi-rural | | Total | |
|-----------------------------|--------------|------------|-------------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Female | 199 | 89 | 136 | 96.5 | 335 | 92 |
| Male | 24 | 11 | 5 | 3.5 | 29 | 8 |
| Total | 223 | 100 | 141 | 100 | 364 | 100 |
| Marital Status | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Single | 31 | 14 | 4 | 3 | 35 | 10 |
| Not single | 191 | 86 | 137 | 97 | 328 | 90 |
| Total | 222 | 100 | 141 | 100 | 363 | 100 |
| Ethnicity | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Visible minority | | | | | | |
| Yes | 15 | 6.8 | 1 | 0.7 | 16 | 4.4 |
| No | 206 | 93.2 | 140 | 99.3 | 346 | 95.6 |
| Total | 221 | 100 | 141 | 100 | 362 | 100 |
| Aboriginal | | | | | | |
| Yes | 4 | 1.8 | 2 | 1.4 | 6 | 1.6 |
| No | 218 | 98.2 | 139 | 98.6 | 357 | 98.4 |
| Total | 222 | 100 | 141 | 100 | 363 | 100 |
| Highest Education | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Postgraduate | 42 | 18.8 | 7 | 5 | 49 | 13.5 |
| Bachelors | 55 | 24.9 | 25 | 17.7 | 80 | 22 |
| College | 43 | 19.9 | 42 | 29.8 | 85 | 23.3 |
| Tech. Voc. | 8 | 3.6 | 12 | 8.5 | 20 | 5.5 |
| High School | 57 | 25.6 | 47 | 33.3 | 104 | 28.6 |
| Other | 18 | 8 | 8 | 5.7 | 26 | 7.1 |
| Total | 223 | 100 | 141 | 100 | 364 | 100 |
| Employment level | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Full-time | 72 | 32.4 | 29 | 20.6 | 101 | 28.2 |
| Part-time | 71 | 32 | 37 | 26.2 | 103 | 28.8 |
| Unemployed | 10 | 4.5 | 1 | 0.7 | 11 | 3.1 |
| Homemaker | 51 | 22.9 | 57 | 40.4 | 108 | 30.2 |
| Student | 2 | 0.9 | 1 | 0.7 | 3 | 0.8 |
| Self-employed | 1 | 0.4 | 1 | 0.7 | 2 | 0.6 |
| Combination | 15 | 6.7 | 15 | 10.6 | 30 | 8.4 |
| Total | 222 | 100 | 141 | 100 | 358 | 100 |
| Family Income (1997) | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Under \$20,000 | 20 | 9.8 | 4 | 3.1 | 24 | 7.3 |
| \$20,000 - \$29,000 | 15 | 7.4 | 16 | 12.6 | 31 | 9.4 |
| \$30,000 - \$39,000 | 17 | 8.3 | 28 | 22 | 45 | 15.6 |
| \$40,000 - \$49,000 | 35 | 17.2 | 26 | 20.5 | 61 | 18.4 |
| \$50,000 - \$69,000 | 53 | 26 | 37 | 29.1 | 90 | 27.2 |
| \$70,000 - \$99,000 | 42 | 20.6 | 11 | 8.7 | 53 | 16 |
| \$100,000 + | 22 | 9.9 | 5 | 3.9 | 27 | 8.2 |
| Total | 204 | 100 | 127 | 100 | 331 | 100 |