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Review of the Organization and Structure of Site Councils in Santa Cruz County Public Schools

Background

The *School Site Council Handbook* from the California Department of Education states “The basic principle underlying the establishment of the School Site Council (SSC) is that those individuals who are most affected by the operation of their school should have a major role in the decisions regarding how their school functions. This involvement occurs through the development of a school improvement plan.”

School site councils are campus-based groups composed of parents and community members, teachers, other school personnel, school administrators and students at the high school level.

According to the *School Site Council Handbook* the School Improvement Plan (SIP), the School-based Coordination Program (SBCP) and the Motivation and Maintenance Program (MMP) were established in 1977, 1981 and 1985, respectively. They were envisioned as ways to increase school-wide effectiveness, improve student achievements, and better prepare students to be productive workers and responsible citizens. These programs require a school site council as a condition for receiving and expending supplemental funds. Approximately 75% of all public schools in California have one or more of these programs.

Scope

The Grand Jury reviewed the organization and structure of school site councils in Santa Cruz County public schools.

The review included the following:

- All California Education Code sections pertaining to school site councils
- Interview with County Superintendent of Schools
- Interviews and a panel discussion with three principals
- Two Grand Jury surveys of school site councils. The Grand Jury designed and wrote two surveys for distribution to principals and chairpersons of school site councils at all Santa Cruz County public schools. One version was sent to 58 principals and the other was sent to 58 chairpersons. Questionnaires were returned by 35 principals and 28 chairpersons.
- Attendance at several school site council meetings
- Attendance at a site council training session

Findings

1. School site councils are authorized under State Education Codes.
2. Education Code §52012 states, “A school site council shall be established at each school that participates in the school improvement program authorized by this chapter. The council shall be composed of the principal and representatives of: teachers selected by teachers at the school; other school personnel selected by other school personnel at the school; parents of pupils attending the school selected by such parents; and, in secondary school, pupils selected by pupils attending the school.” It also states the council shall be constituted to ensure parity between school personnel and parents/students.
3. Education Code §52012 states that the term and method of selection and replacement shall be specified in the school improvement plan. It also states that the Superintendent of Public Instruction shall provide examples of selection and replacement procedures that may be considered by school site councils.
4. Education Code §52011 states that the district governing board shall provide each principal with information regarding SIP and site councils and ensure that the information is provided to teachers, other school personnel, parents and in secondary schools, pupils.
5. Education Code §52034(c) states that the school district governing boards should adopt policies regarding the responsibilities of school site councils and establish communication procedures to ensure reasonable opportunities for each council or its representatives to meet with the governing body.
6. Specifications for site council membership are inconsistent within the statutes. For example, according to Education Code §52012 and §52852, SSC “shall be composed of parents of pupils attending the school selected by such parents.” Later these same codes define this segment of the site council members as “parents or other community members selected by parents.”
7. Education Code §52870 states, “It is the intent of the State Legislature that, to the extent possible, the members of the school site council represent the composition of the school's pupil population.”
8. As set forth in the Education Code, the School Improvement Plan and the School Based Coordinated Program receive numerous reviews resulting in approval or disapproval at the levels of site council, district governing body, and the State Board of Education. In addition, by statute, the principal is responsible for ongoing administration of the plan, and the district superintendent must, upon request, assist with the design and implementation of the plan.
9. The Education Code did not reveal any requirements for oversight of the school site council as a body.

10. Process for nominating parents varied among schools responding. For example, responses from principals included:
 - “Membership seems to be for anyone who asks up until the number of parents is met.”
 - “We have a table at Open House in spring with educational materials and encourage people to nominate themselves.”
 - “Interested parents self-select to run for site council seats.”
11. The use of a nominating committee, a standard election practice, was not mentioned in any of the responses from site council chairpersons.
12. Twenty percent of the chairpersons’ responses stated they had received a personal invitation to serve on the site council.
13. Some principals stated that it was sometimes difficult to get enough parents to serve on site councils. Other principals enjoyed an ample number of volunteers for the required parent seats with additional volunteers to act as alternates.
14. Survey results indicated that the three most widely used methods in the election process were:
 - ballots returned by parents and students
 - hand vote at a meeting
 - ballots placed in a secure ballot box
15. Survey results indicated that 18 different methods were used to count ballots. The most common counting methods were:
 - by principal and secretary
 - by projects coordinator
 - by staff and site council
 - by a show of hands or a ballot vote at meeting
16. Of 63 respondents (35 Principals and 28 Chairpersons) only 21 reported using more than one method of encouraging individuals to join their school site council.

17. Respondents were given the opportunity to indicate which method of communication was used. Six options included:

- school newsletter
- local newspaper
- back to school night
- school bulletin
- student
- other

Some schools used more than one option. Methods were as follows:

Communication Method	Frequency
School Newsletter	42
Back to School Night	25
School Bulletin	16

18. Communication methods not widely used were:

- A marquee at the front of the school
- A flyer
- Word of mouth
- A notice to parents hand-carried during child’s pick-up
- A parent newsletter
- A faculty newsletter
- At PTA meetings

19. Use of a local newspaper to encourage SSC membership was not indicated on any surveys.

20. After the formation of the SSC, the chairperson’s communications with parents showed a wider variety of communication techniques.

Communication Method	Frequency
School Newsletter	16
Meetings	4
School Bulletin	6

21. According to the *School Site Council Handbook*, “After the SSC is first formed or new members are selected to ongoing councils, the school/district should provide training and ongoing in-service to the members to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities. The training provided to the SSC should be on a regular basis, and the training should be appropriate to the tasks at hand.” Training is not being provided to all site councils in Santa Cruz County.

22. In the committee’s interview with the County Superintendent of Schools, it was stated “We are now looking at doing training for participants.”

23. Upon request, training support is available through the County Office of Education.
24. Survey responses revealed that in many cases parity between school personnel and parent/student representatives was not achieved. Parity was reported by 18 of 31 principals and 5 of 16 chairpersons.
25. Respondents stated that Hispanics and other minorities in many communities are under represented on school site councils.
26. Some of the methods used to count votes have the appearance of impropriety. While appearance does not constitute wrongdoing, it can still undermine the integrity of the voting process.

Conclusions

Communication to parents and the local community regarding the school site council, and nominations in particular, needs to be improved.

Even though it is not required by education code, nominations to fill seats on site councils should be conducted in accordance with democratic principles.

Security of the voting process is non-existent in some schools.

- A secured ballot box is not utilized at each school.
- Some parents are eliminated from the voting process by missing an election meeting.
- Votes returned by students may get lost in transit or misplaced.
- Voting process should be established in accordance with democratic procedures.

Training should be provided annually to the school site councils.

School site councils are not adequately publicized.

Too much dependence is placed on the school newsletter for communication.

Most schools indicated that they had difficulty obtaining new SSC members.

Participation greatly contributes to the success of a school site council; therefore, in order to stimulate interest, more creative efforts should be used.

While the Education Code provides for specific oversight of school plans, it is ambiguous regarding the structure and organization of school site councils.

Recommendations

1. The educational community needs to communicate to the public the importance of site councils in the improvement of schools. A greater variety of communication methods should be used including “person-to-person,” press releases, local newspapers, radio stations, cable access and local television stations.
2. School site councils should use mass media communication techniques to publicize its nomination and election process.
3. The County Office of Education should provide, at school district’s request, press releases and distribution methods for publicizing school site councils.

4. Special emphasis in the nomination process should be communicated to Hispanic and other minority parents in the school's community to ensure fair demographic representation of student population on site councils.
5. School site councils should create nominating committees charged with seeking out new members and ensuring all parents gain knowledge about the school site council functions.
6. School site councils by-laws should clearly define and implement the nomination and election process for membership on the site council including a formal vote counting process.
7. School site councils should consider expanding voting opportunity via mail, phone, fax or e-mail.
8. A centralized training and follow-up program should be provided on a regular basis.
9. School administrators should become fully acquainted with all sections of the Education Code pertaining to school site councils.
10. Parents and community residents should be made aware of the great value provided by school site councils.
11. Schools need to ensure parity among school personnel and parent/student representatives in the composition of its school site council membership.
12. Schools need to improve representation in the school site council to reflect the demographic characteristics of the school population.

Responses Required

Entity	Recommendations	Respond Within
Santa Cruz County Office of Education	3	60 Days
Bonny Doon Union Elementary	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Happy Valley Elementary	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Live Oak School District	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Mountain Elementary	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Pacific Elementary	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Pajaro Valley Unified School District	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Santa Cruz City School District	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Scotts Valley Unified School District	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days
Soquel Union Elementary School District	1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12	60 Days