

Georgia School Councils: Constituent Group Perceptions on
Improving Student Achievement

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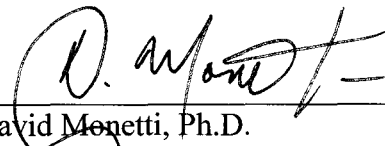


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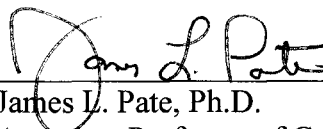
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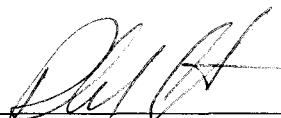


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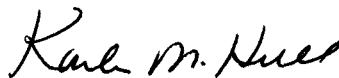
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

There is a nationwide effort in today's society to improve the quality of the public schools. Recent research indicates that schools have an increased probability of success if they transform themselves into professional learning communities (Blankstein, 2004). Senge (1990) introduced the concept of this "learning organization" in his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, which largely referred to situations related to business. This thinking, however, has been expanded to include educational contexts (Blankstein). Other authors and researchers have utilized terminology such as "school-based learning communities," (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995), "circles of support," (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995), and "professional learning communities" (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

As noted by Blankstein (2004), various terminologies and many definitions relating to professional learning communities exist; the literature reveals that the purpose of all learning communities is improved academic achievement for students. The focus of learning communities should be on the people who comprise the learning community itself and how they work together to achieve this common goal of improved student achievement (Blankstein).

While professional learning communities are often defined by the importance of instructionally focused teacher teams and the process focused on the collective work of

teachers within schools, many educators have begun to view the ideal professional learning community as encompassing all the working components of the educational setting (Schmoker, 2006). Parent-teacher organizations, local boards of education and school councils have generally not been considered part of the school's professional learning community, but these school structures can assist to create what DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Karhanek (2004) refer to as a "collaborative culture" within the learning environment. A collaborative culture focuses attention on student learning, and the goal of quality schools is academic growth for all students (Johnson, 2005).

School structures that support teacher teamwork and employ the same empirical processes utilized by effective teaching teams can assist schools in improving the quality of services that they provide for students (Schmoker, 2006). Schmoker noted those team-based processes used by effective teaching teams include identification of needs, discussion of possible solutions, implementation of improvement strategies, and assessment of results.

Throughout the literature, there is evidence that the implementation of school councils or shared governance arrangements involving parents in the education of their children may improve the quality of education for students (Bauer, Bogotch & Park, 1998; Leithwood, 2002; Lontos, 1994; Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Pharis, 2005). As suggested by Pharis much of the success of school councils can also be attributed to the participation and interaction of the school principal with council members. Along with leadership, open communication is vital for successful school council operation because of the need for trust among the council members (Pharis).

According to Section 20-2-86 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated

(O.C.G.A.) (*Official Compilation...*2008), beginning October 1, 2003, local boards of education in the state of Georgia were required by law to have an operational school council at each of the schools under their jurisdiction. The school council law became a reality in Georgia with the enactment of the *A Plus Education Reform Act (2000)*. Using the parameters of this law, the local school board continues to control all of the local schools. The common purpose of the school council is to provide advice, recommendations, and assistance to the principal and its respective school board (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85*) (*Official Compilation...*).

This study explored the implementation of Georgia school councils as an education reform effort and their roles as components of professional learning communities. In addition, the study examined research findings concerning the use of shared decision-making as a venue for improving teaching and learning, and includes research on effective school council practices. The purpose of this study is to determine if constituent groups have a perception that school councils affect student achievement.

Statement of the Problem

In order for school councils to be successful, the objective of the school council law is clear: for communities and schools to work together to create a better understanding of the management and operation of the local schools (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85*) (*Official Compilation...*). This law also directs that school councils be designed to involve parents, teachers, administrators, and local business representatives so all schools might improve the quality of public education in the state of Georgia. The General Assembly proposed this law to get all the school stakeholders together to build a "spirit of cooperation to solve difficult educational problems, improve academic achievement,

provide support for teachers and administrators and bring parents into the school-based decision-making process" (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85*) (*Official Compilation...*). This law has been amended several times in an attempt to ensure that it is meeting its intended purposes. Little research exists to verify if indeed there is a perception among constituent group members that the implementation of school councils is impacting student achievement in a positive way.

Theoretical Context

As they accomplish their common goals and learn to work together, members of school councils and members of all groups will progress through several stages of development which were identified by Tuckman (1965) as he described the five stages of group dynamics. He referred to these stages as forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning.

Forming represents the initial stage of group dynamics (Tuckman, 1965). This stage is characterized by polite interaction and any discussion of controversial topics is kept to a minimum (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). Conzemius and O'Neill state that individuals within the group often guard their own opinions and offer limited suggestions concerning issues. During this stage, groups have a tendency to rely on those members who emerge as leaders to speak and guide the agenda of the meeting (Conzemius & O'Neill).

Storming is the second level of group development (Tuckman, 1965). In this stage, communication among members is limited (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). Individuals fail to concede on issues because of the lack of communication, and according to Conzemius and O'Neill, this stage is often characterized by personality

clashes which can lead to the establishment of factions or liaisons which may result in little or no productivity being realized from meetings. Groups who are in the storming stage accomplish very little work and waste valuable time (Conzemius & O'Neill).

In the norming stage, subgroups often begin to realize that a lack of communication and internal strife are detrimental to the group's effectiveness (Tuckman, 1965). At this point, the group begins to work together for the common good of the organization (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). Individuals begin to experience security in expressing opinions and offering input and the most important aspect of the norming stage is that communication begins to be more effective and more efficient group work can take place resulting in positive outcomes (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002).

When the group has reached the performing stage, it has developed a system of complete communication and total trust among the members (Tuckman, 1965). Their work is carried out in a systematic and efficient manner, and group members are supportive of each other and supportive of group decisions, resulting in a successful overall assembly (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). When group members have reached the performing stage, trust and purpose of the group takes precedence over any importance that had previously been placed on hierarchy within the group (Conzemius & O'Neill).

The fifth stage of group development is the transforming or adjourning stage (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). Tuckman (1965) added this element of group development 10 years after his original research. In this stage, Tuckman suggests the group has completed many of its goals and begins a process of "unforming." While it is important for school councils to have an awareness of this stage, and while members

rotate on and off the council, the work of the school council is an on-going process (Conzemius & O'Neill).

As noted by Conzemius and O'Neill (2002), the establishment of community and efficient operation of group processes takes much practice. These authors also contend that when provided the appropriate training, time to deal with issues, and support to advance through the stages of group development, any group will advance along a continuum from chaos toward a level of high performance. Further, they purport that the speed at which each group transforms itself through the various levels of development is dependent upon the size of the group, difficulty of the situation and the tasks in question. Members' personalities must also be taken into consideration (Conzemius & O'Neill).

School councils are groups of people who have the common goal of improving the quality of education for students (Leithwood, 2000). As an element of the school's professional learning community, this research on group formation and effectiveness is important because the school council's work can be enhanced by their own awareness and realization of where the group is in its development (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002).

No Child Left Behind

Over recent years, schools have attempted to implement various measures of school reform with limited results (Hord, 2004). According to Hord, even with today's unparalleled focus on standards and accountability, discrepancies continue to exist in the quality of education provided for children from "state to state, district to district and school to school" (p. 5). The premise behind the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* is that all children can learn and all children should be expected to learn and it forces the public school system to meet the needs of all the nation's students (USDOE, 2007). This federal

legislation requires that inequities in local schools be identified and addressed for all children, regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status and that schools find ways to involve parents in the education of their children No Child Left Behind Act, 20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq. (2002).

The legislation is designed to improve the quality of education that students receive in the public schools (NCLB, 2002). This law requires that local schools are held accountable for the performance of students, and it requires the public reporting of student assessment results. NCLB also directs that teaching strategies used in the schools must be based on scientifically-based research. Through this legislation, parents are also provided improved opportunities to become involved in their children's education. The law also provides for a measure of local control and flexibility as states set their own parameters for success (USDOE, 2007).

Those who seek to reform education might consider the views of Jaworski (1996). According to Joseph Jaworski, in his book *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*, organizations will accomplish objectives, as will societies, through a shift of mind, or "metanoia" (p. 94). Jaworski contends that a deeper level of commitment will emerge from this change in thinking resulting in self-governance or an extension of the democratic process. When empowered through the democratic processes, people can "create" their own destinies (Jaworski).

The implementation of school councils in Georgia is essentially a "grassroots" democratic process in which citizens may participate in the operation of their local public schools. As Glickman and Aldridge (2001) indicate, one of the central purposes of public education is to facilitate as students and communities gravitate toward a more democratic

society. According to these authors, early American concepts of democracy as intended by the forefathers protected against aristocratic rule to create a free society governed by citizens. They also note that a necessary element of governance for the people and by the people was that of a common education for all citizens. Education then, has very important implications for democracy (Glickman & Aldridge).

Significance of the Study

This study of Georgia school councils and their impact on student achievement was significant for a number of reasons. According to the school council law, the purpose of the school council is to improve student achievement and to involve parents in decision-making at the school level (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85 (Official Compilation...)*). The research was necessary because it provided information on constituent member perceptions related to the usefulness of the school council law, and whether the law is meeting its intended goals.

Findings suggest that involvement and utilization of the school council may be a means for principals and superintendents to positively impact student achievement and other aspects of school improvement in their local schools. Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of parents in the education of their own children.

Another basis for the study involved the fact that little research has been completed concerning Georgia school councils and the completion of this study furthered the existing knowledge base concerning school councils. In addition, this research provides information for legislators concerning the perceived usefulness of the school council law in meeting its intended purposes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if constituent groups had a perception that Georgia school councils affect student achievement in a positive manner. Furthermore, data were analyzed to determine if a significant statistical difference existed among the various constituent groups concerning their perceptions regarding the impact of school councils on student achievement. A final purpose of the study was to identify best practices of school councils that would improve student achievement.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of school council members concerning effectiveness of Georgia school councils in improving student achievement?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference among constituent groups in the perceptions of school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement?
3. How do school council members perceive their role in factors of school improvement, communication, and professional learning community?
4. What school council best practices could be identified by the school council which they believe to positively impact student achievement?

Limitations

Quantitative data were gathered for this research study through the use of a survey. The researcher created the survey specifically for this purpose. Instrument reliability was a concern since the survey instrument was created for this study by the researcher. Qualitative data were taken from an open-ended question on the survey and from two focus group interviews. Various limitations are associated with survey research and the focus group interview as data-gathering methods. The researcher must consider

each limitation as a threat to the generalization of knowledge. These limitations are related to internal and external validity. The research design for this study is a concurrent triangulation design, which also has inherent limitations. Researcher bias must be considered as a limitation of this study. The limitations of this study are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Delimitations

This study was limited to a stratified random sample of 60 schools in the three Regional Educational Service Agencies, (RESA) Districts of the Valdosta State University, (VSU) service area. Individuals who serve on school councils from those randomly selected schools were eligible to complete the survey. Two school councils were selected at random from this group to take part in focus group interviews. Generalizations in this research may be limited by the fact that participants who completed the survey or took part in interviews were required to currently serve on a Georgia school council in the VSU service area. Parents, teachers, administrators and community members not serving on school councils might possibly offer additional viewpoints that have not been considered by the researcher. Additionally, this research does not involve data gathered from students.

Definition of Terms

School Council - This is a site based decision-making body comprised of the principal, teachers, parents and business representatives (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-86*) (*Official Compilation...*). Decisions made by the school council are intended to improve the quality of education for all students and to ultimately improve student achievement. School councils' decision-making powers are advisory in Georgia according to the law.

Constituent Group – The Georgia school council law indicates that council membership should be chosen from the constituents of the school community - principal, teachers, parents and community business representatives (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85*) (*Official Compilation...*)

Shared Decision - Making – A democratic group process in which each constituent group has input into the decisions, which affect the group (Blasé & Blasé, 2001).

RESA District – Refers to the Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) as established by the Georgia State Department of Education (GDOE, 2008). These agencies have several purposes which may include assisting local schools in providing improved services to students by assisting with improving student achievement, improved school accountability, development and implementation of student assessment and evaluation, and utilization of technology to improve instruction (RESA, 2008).

Elementary School – For purposes of this study, any school consisting of, but not limited to, grades kindergarten through fifth grade, selected at random from a stratified random sample of schools all geographically located within the three RESA Districts which are in the VSU service area. Each school included in the study is required by law to have an operational school council. Some schools consisted of additional grade levels but were included in the study in an attempt to increase the return rate of surveys.

Procedures

All schools in the VSU service area containing at least some elementary grade levels of kindergarten through fifth grade were eligible to participate in the study. A stratified random sample of those schools was chosen from each of the three RESA

Districts located in the VSU service area. A total of 60 schools were chosen to receive the researcher created survey. Four surveys were mailed to each school council for a total distribution of 240 surveys. Since the return rate on the first administration was insufficient, surveys were sent to non-responding schools a second time. Principals were asked to give a survey to one teacher, one parent and one business representative who served on their school council. Principals were also asked to complete a survey. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed from the returned surveys.

Two school councils were chosen at random to participate in focus group interviews. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and were later transcribed into written form. Qualitative data analysis procedures were employed to identify consistent themes within the text of the transcripts.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 of this study contains the review of literature concerning the implementation and utilization of school councils. The literature review also contains information on shared decision-making and school council best practices and the ability of professional learning communities to improve the quality of education for students. The third chapter of this study focuses on methodology, and contains more in-depth explanations of various procedures including selection of participants, design of instrumentation, study design, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 consists of quantitative and qualitative data analysis and results. Chapter 5 includes a summary of findings, conclusions, implications for future practice, and recommendations for future study concerning the use of Georgia school councils and their involvement in professional learning communities.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review includes topics relevant to Georgia school councils. Those topics include the role of school councils as elements of the school's professional learning community, research on shared decision-making and effective school council practices. The literature review includes examples of school councils in Chicago, Kentucky and Georgia (Daniels, 1996; Klecker, Austin & Burns, 2000; Pharis, 2005; Presser, 1991)

The foundation of democracy is education (Glickman & Aldridge, 2001). As Glickman and Aldridge discussed the relationship of education and democracy, they asserted that after the founding fathers developed the constitution, they realized that a necessary component of self-governance was an education for all citizens. They went on to indicate that a democratic society requires that the institutional and administrative practices of public schools must reflect democratic beliefs. Teachers, parents and community members must model and provide democratic practices which give students the background knowledge they need to participate and excel in a democratic society (Glickman & Aldridge).

The school council is an example of such a practice and is an entity through which the concepts of democracy can be implemented. Learning communities are places

where such democratic practices are exhibited and where a climate of open participation and human construction of knowledge is prevalent (Glickman & Aldridge, 2001).

Democracy is dependent upon strong public schools, and if public schools are to be strong, partnerships with school constituents must be strong (Johnson, 2005).

Organizations are comprised of human beings (Glasser, 1990). According to Glasser, those organizations which intend to perform well or to create an atmosphere of quality should realize that the human beings who comprise the organization are genetically programmed with five basic needs. Those needs are survival, love, power, fun, and freedom. Workers' motivations are more intrinsic than extrinsic (Glasser). Those who are charged with leading organizations can create desired results or efficiency by focusing on the intrinsic motivation of workers and satisfying one or more of their basic needs (Glasser).

A quality organization is a need-satisfying organization (Glasser, 1990). Lead managers are more successful than boss managers and are more likely to sustain positive outcomes when they ensure that workers feel their work is personally satisfying and that the leader is concerned about the well-being of the individual worker (Glasser).

Quality schools are created when their environments invite ongoing discussion and people's differences are valued, respected, and appreciated (Johnson, 2005). According to Johnson, teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and all stakeholders of the school must model the types of learning that are expected to take place in the classroom. He noted that this will require an examination and understanding of attitudes and beliefs related to the learning of everyone involved and schools are considered successful when everyone in the school environment works to ensure that all students are successful. The

target for quality should be growth for all students and this should be understood by all stakeholders (Johnson).

Johnson (2005) advocated that school leaders could create quality schools by assisting their stakeholders in connecting purpose with practice. He also insisted that any discussion of quality centers on a dynamic balance among what he terms as the *Four P's*: purpose, priorities, parameters, and principles. Organizational structures must support school constituents to consider the following:

- the *purpose* of learning,
- the *parameters* utilized to determine definitions of success,
- the *practices* which align daily learning with organizational principles,
- the *priorities* that determine success for all students (Johnson 2005).

All children can learn and all children should expect to receive a quality education (Anderson & Davenport, 2002). Anderson and Davenport posit that this quality of education should be such that it assists students in attaining mastery of the essential curriculum. They discussed the effective schools movement in their book, *Closing the Achievement Gap: No Excuses* and identified five characteristics or correlates of effective schools. They advocated that all schools can be improved and that students' capacity to learn should not be based on aspects of family background, race, or socioeconomic status.

Anderson and Davenport (2002) state that effective schools are institutions where the principal provides instructional leadership to transform the school's vision into reality. In their discussion of effective schools they report students and staff have the highest of expectations, standards for their work, and focus on student achievement. Furthermore, in those effective schools it is understood that the instructional program

concentrates only on reading, writing, and mathematics and that the school environment is safe and orderly, allowing teaching and learning to flourish. In order to guide instruction, effective schools frequently assess student achievement to guide in all decision-making (Anderson & Davenport).

Professional Learning Communities

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*. This study created a need for educational reform in the United States because it identified problems with teacher quality and training and indicated that a crisis in education was inevitable (Hord, 2004). Hord also noted there have been many school reform initiatives throughout the country since that time. The implementation of shared governance and school councils is an example of such an effort (Pharis, 2005).

Blankstein (2004) contended that the best hope for schools to achieve success and to implement substantive school reform is to transform themselves into professional learning communities. The concept of the “learning organization” first originated with Peter Senge (1990) in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. Later, Thomas Sergiovanni (1992) adapted this terminology into a more educational context when he developed the principle of “team learning.” Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1995) expanded the idea of the “school based learning community.” Further, Newman and Wehlage (1995) contended that successful schools were supported by “circles of support.” Hord (1997) and Dufour and Eaker (1998) utilized the terminology of the “professional learning community.”

According to Blankstein (2004), several principles are common to the professional learning community. He noted that common characteristics of the professional learning community include an emphasis on student learning and an

atmosphere of collaboration among the various constituents of the school. Specifically, those common principles are characterized by common mission, vision, values, and goals (Blankstein). Additionally, Blankstein contended that professional learning communities provide systems of support which ensure achievement for all students and stakeholders understand that the purpose of collaborative teaming focuses on teaching and learning. Also in Blankstein's view, all decision making is informed by data and the goal is continuous instructional improvement. Professional learning communities also seek to engage family and community in students' education (Blankstein).

There is no step-by-step process for guiding schools or school districts in the cultural transformation into a professional learning community (Eaker, DuFour, & Dufour, 2002). Eaker et al. learned from their research that schools and school districts however, do have a conceptual framework from which they may model their school improvement efforts. Their conceptual framework can be categorized into three major themes that are evident in the policies, programs, and practices of the organization. First, there is a common mission, vision, values and goals which should be developed collaboratively with input from all school constituents. Secondly, the organization must be comprised of collaborative teams that work together to achieve the organization's common goals. Finally, a focus on results must exist as evidenced by a common commitment to continuous improvement.

Supervisors in educational situations, such as building principals or district superintendents, should not be relied upon to make all the decisions in isolation (Johnson, 2005). As Johnson indicated, all those connected to the school should decide that they are responsible for ensuring school and student success. Partnerships are formed in this way,

The authority of parent-led school councils in Chicago was wide ranging (Daniels, 1996). Parent-led school councils in the 1988 school reform effort had immediate and direct input into curriculum and teaching. Further, these parent-led councils also had the ability to hire, retain, and even release the school principal if they deemed it necessary. These school councils in Chicago were also responsible for examining the principal's plan for the implementation of instruction. Additionally, the school council members were to be actively involved in creating and evaluating the annual school improvement plan (Daniels). Even decisions concerning allocation of money were placed under the jurisdiction of the school councils (Daniels). These decisions included the use of Title I funds as well as other funding sources often involving several hundred thousand dollars. According to Daniels parent council members to maintain all these crucial responsibilities, it was obvious that they would have to adhere to sound educational philosophy and be knowledgeable of curriculum, teaching methods, and materials. Above all, council members were to be capable of making proper decisions on behalf of children (Daniels).

Kentucky's Reform Effort at School Advisory Councils

In examining a research study completed on Kentucky's School Based Decision-Making Councils, the minutes of each monthly school council meeting were analyzed (Klecker et al., 2000). The study revealed that the councils within the state could make decisions regarding a variety of school related issues. Those issues were of a salient nature and included topics such as scheduling, curriculum, instruction, student discipline, personnel, staff development, council procedures, and budget (Klecker, et al). The study revealed that middle and high school councils made more curriculum decisions than did

elementary councils. It was also concluded that elementary councils made fewer decisions about personnel and discipline than did high school councils.

Georgia Research

Georgia school councils are comprised of members representing various constituencies including parents, teachers, business representatives and principals (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85*) (*Official Compilation...*). Pharis (2005) utilized survey research to assess school council member perceptions in the Valdosta State University service area. VSU is a regional university located in the South Georgia city of Valdosta. The survey created for this study was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data with quantitative procedures being the primary method of data analysis. The researcher assessed the difference between issues that school council members perceived they had addressed as compared to the issues that were actually addressed. The significant difference between perceived issues addressed by school councils and issues actually addressed indicated school councils should develop priorities for their actions through a focused action plan.

The importance of the results in the Pharis (2005) study cannot be overemphasized. It should be noted that this study took place in the VSU service area, as did the current study. The results of the Pharis study indicated that school councils should establish a clear plan of action focusing on several issues that were determined to be priorities for the school and its local community. Pharis differentiated however, that daily school operations were to be addressed by administrators and teachers, therefore, not necessarily becoming an issue for school council attention. The results of the study also

indicated that local councils should stagger member terms to avoid beginning a school year with an inexperienced council.

Several factors existed which allowed for the council's effective discussion of an issue (Pharis, 2005). The Pharis study revealed that those factors were open communication among constituents, access to information for all council members, cooperation, teamwork, and development of focus. In order for school councils to maintain their effectiveness, Pharis suggested that members undergo site-based professional training in the shared decision-making processes. Furthermore, the study also indicated that student performance can be improved through the involvement of a variety of constituents in school level decision-making and additionally the study indicated that the principal plays a vital role in council effectiveness. For this reason, Pharis posited that school principals are encouraged to undergo leadership training designed to improve collaboration and shared decision making in the school for which they are responsible. Pharis' data confirmed that the most important result of implementation of a school council is likely the improved communication and availability of information to the local school community.

Shared Decision- Making

Shared decision-making is a collaborative process with the purpose of developing educational decisions (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). Blasé and Blasé studied teacher job satisfaction as teachers participated in shared decision - making schools and they advocated that before decisions are made, input from each group impacted by the decision must be considered. The researchers concluded that when teachers are allowed to take part in shared decision - making processes, they enjoy a sense of empowerment

for three reasons. First they have a sense of trust in their principal, and the principal trusts them. Secondly, the teachers felt that they were allowed to provide valuable input into the substantive issues that affect students. Thirdly, teachers felt that they were free from principal's punitive actions in situations where decisions were made incorrectly. Shared decision-making can take many forms, but several basic generalizations assume that those closest to the results of the decision will make the best decision (Blasé & Blasé). The decision or change will likely be accepted and long lasting when participants have ownership in the decision-making process (Liontos, 1994).

Shared decision-making has various meanings (Riley, 1999). In a qualitative study of a school principal, faculty, and community, Riley found that some respondents viewed shared decision-making as an opportunity to offer input, while others saw it as a means to allow groups to make the decisions. Those individuals with the more restricted view of giving input perceived that the decision making process was working. They were satisfied with its implementation; yet, the other group was less satisfied with the way present structures were operating.

Further, Riley (1999) indicated that teachers are mostly concerned with providing input into the decisions that directly impact their classrooms and are less interested in participating in decisions that do not directly impact instruction. Yet another of his findings indicated that while teachers want to participate in shared decision-making processes, they are discouraged due to their perception that their involvement makes little difference.

The major purpose of shared decision-making is to improve student achievement and improved school effectiveness (Liontos, 1994). Through the implementation of the

shared decision-making process, staff commitment will often increase, thus ensuring that schools are more responsive to student needs (Liontos).

Research has shown that shared decision-making contributes to school reform and creates an atmosphere where teachers participate in collaborative inquiry (Morrissey & Cowan, 2004). The process often leads to opportunities for school improvement, and as Morrissey and Cowan indicated, one important component of this collaborative environment is a facilitative principal who shares power, authority, and decision making with other members of the school community. Further, their research concluded that the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal often establishes a school environment in which shared decision making is promoted and staff input is sought and valued.

One problem facing the implementation of the shared decision-making process is that teachers are often unaware of how to participate in shared decision-making capacities (Morrissey & Cowan, 2004). As Morrissey and Cowan carried out their research, they noted that principals may need to provide training for their teachers in these roles and responsibilities. In an effective school, informed decisions are based on data, and outcomes are evaluated with all decisions being filtered utilizing the school's vision statement (Morrissey & Cowan).

Morrissey and Cowan (2004) also found that in schools which implemented shared decision making processes, teachers felt that their input was valued by the principal and that teachers were trusted to make good decisions. Consequently, the Morrissey and Cowan research revealed that improved communication and problem solving are dividends of this governance arrangement. Additionally, they indicated that

increased decision-making capacity for teachers fosters an increased sense of empowerment, especially in decisions that impact their daily work. They also suggest that this governance arrangement results in a stronger sense of involvement of all stakeholders and responsibility for, and freedom in the decisions which are made to support the work of the school.

Collective intelligence and organizational problem solving were studied by Heifetz and Laurie (1997). They found that more creative solutions, along with greater trust and commitment, resulted when supervisors sought to explore ideas and energy from input of stakeholders throughout the organization. Similarly, when principals seek to solve educational problems and establish the school's direction and values by incorporating ideas from teachers and other community members, participants' confidence is enhanced, school improvement projects and ideas are brought forth, and the leadership potential of participants is developed (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002)

Shared decision-making or shared governance can create a community of leaders within the school and the result can be increased productivity, enhanced job satisfaction, and a stronger commitment to the organization (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). Consequently, Blasé and Blasé contend that principals transform teachers and other school community members into leaders when they empower them to take part in decision-making concerning the operation of the school.

Therefore, those principals who practiced shared governance expanded the influence of teachers in the classroom, the school, and in the district allowing them to take part in decisions related to personnel, time, and space (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). In the

process, the Blasé and Blasé research underscored that teachers were also empowered to make decisions concerning teaching materials and curricula and not only were teachers involved in instructional decisions, they also assisted in hiring, budgeting, student placement, and planning. When teachers were allowed to take part in the decision making of the school, the result was increased productivity, improved job satisfaction, and stronger commitment to the organization.

When properly established, shared decision-making processes can improve school decision-making and increase the likelihood that a decision will be accepted and implemented (Liontos, 1994). Liontos also noted that this acceptance and implementation could result in improved staff morale, commitment, and teamwork. He also indicated that the process builds trust, improves skills of staff and administrators, and creates a more effective school in general. The total involvement of more people in a decision creates a likelihood that better decisions will result from a wider range analysis of various issues (Liontos).

Conversely, the negative aspects of shared decision-making must be considered (Liontos, 1994). According to Liontos, time proves to be the greatest challenge because discussions involving the analysis of problems and possible solutions are time consuming. Often times, teachers and administrators can be reluctant to enter into the shared decision making process due to the multiplicity of their own personal and professional responsibilities (Liontos).

Group members working in the shared decision-making process often have to assume new and different roles (Liontos, 1994). Liontos asserts that teachers often practice their vocations alone in the classroom, but in the shared decision-making

context, they must learn to engage others, negotiate and deliberate, resolve problems, and make decisions with others. He also contends that the principal, who normally may make authoritarian decisions, must learn to organize, advise, and build group consensus.

Ultimately, the principal has to learn to share authority with the group and yet remain as the key member in establishing and maintaining the shared decision-making process (Liontos).

Schools choosing to implement shared decision-making are encouraged to focus on a single issue as an introduction to the process (Liontos, 1994). Issues with little significant educational impact, such as lunchroom duties or student drop-off supervision, could be suitable beginnings, according to Liontos. Liontos' research suggests that more salient issues be slowly added when members have a deeper understanding of the shared decision-making process and the impact of group dynamics. Surely, shared decision-making teams are more successful when they focus on a specific problem, carefully investigate alternatives, communicate information to the various groups being represented, and finally make decisions based on careful analysis of data (Liontos).

Many variables must be considered if shared decision-making is to be effective (Liontos, 1994). For instance, Lintos found that school councils or others considering the implementation of a shared decision-making model may benefit by initiating discussions on a small scale. He went on to cite the importance of initiating this process by agreeing on specifics at the outset and clearly defining procedures, roles, and expectations. Consequently, he insisted that all group members should be given an opportunity to get involved. Properly implemented, the process can build trust and support (Liontos).

Shared decision-making is not a cure for the many problems that plague the educational community (Lange, 1993). It has been touted though, as a component of a larger reform movement that may help to meet local, state, and national mandates for school improvement and change (Lange). Lange studied site based shared decision-making implemented in six schools over a 15 month period. His research indicated that the major reason for implementing site-based shared decision-making should be improved student achievement and success. He also determined that shared decision-making during the process will be difficult and sometimes frustrating.

In a review of 24 schools, the School Restructuring Study identified three potential challenges that principals must address as they restructure their school and implement school-based decision-making (Peterson, 1995). This study noted that to experience success, principals must assist stakeholders in developing a clear common educational vision. Peterson also stated principals must assist constituents in developing effective decision-making and governance procedures. Finally, principals must direct stakeholders in building well functioning teams (Peterson).

In addition, this study suggested that the entire shared governance process might be improved if principals worked to insure increased dialogue between staff and administration (Peterson, 1995). Peterson purported members must maintain a strict focus on the school's mission as well as the purposes of the decision making body. Additionally, he reported council members must also take part in systematic training in group decision-making processes

In analyzing the shared decision-making process, it is evident that leadership strategies can become complex (Lashway, 1996). Lashway also pointed out that

principals are no longer the ultimate authority on all decisions. In this open situation, he also noted that authority is decentralized and principals must learn to take on the role of facilitator as opposed to that of director. The principal sometimes must differentiate between directive and facilitative skills and may have to challenge decisions that inhibit student success and achievement (Lashway).

Another researcher, Weiss (1993) studied shared decision-making as a school reform effort in which teachers had more participation in school issues previously decided by principals. According to Weiss, it seems only fair that teachers should make contributions in the conditions that impact their work environment. In her study, she noted that shared decision-making could yield benefits in teacher morale, commitment, and ownership of school decisions. Weiss also found that through this process, school decisions are more likely to be implemented successfully and sustained over time. Therefore, social and collegial satisfaction is improved when stakeholders are active in school decision-making (Weiss)

Further, Weiss (1993) learned that shared decision-making is an avenue for the construction of knowledge and information where teachers and administrators can unite their efforts to improve the school. However, that is not always the case (Weiss). Her findings related to shared decision-making were somewhat negative pertaining to the benefits to teaching and learning. Weiss noted that the principal often introduces change but that teachers are often oppositional to that reform or change. Weiss also said that since most teachers know the principal is ultimately responsible for the progress of the school, they "self censor" themselves as to proposals. Her study concluded there are

benefits to implementation of shared decision-making but teachers often used their powers to slow the pace of change.

Effective School Council Practice

School councils are an example of grassroots democracy in action and members participate in the democratic process through the sharing of power and responsibility (Leithwood, 2002). Leithwood posited that these school councils use group dynamics to arrive at the best possible decisions in an attempt to bring about school improvement and he advocated that these organizations are used as an element of school reform and renewal. The implementation of school councils can yield many benefits and according to Leithwood, their most positive use is the effective implementation of decisions resulting from the experiences and viewpoints of representative groups of people.

Open communication and collaborative problem solving are two of the factors identified by the National Education Association as critical to effective schools (Leithwood, 2002). Leithwood also predicted that future school reform would be characterized by endeavors to construct more effective learning communities and involve outside support systems. Such school reform will be designed to improve collaboration and communication of school stakeholders (Leithwood).

School councils or strong parent dominated decision-making bodies help to improve school effectiveness and strengthen community relationships (Leithwood, 2002). Leithwood stated that those strong community bonds that invite parent input on school councils can create three benefits for schools. First, these partnerships can assist to improve communication between the school and the family. Secondly, they can improve parents' active roles in assisting their children with instructional support. Finally,

participation in such supportive school structures increases parents' decision-making capacities thus developing their leadership skills and this participation also helps to improve utilization of community resources which strengthen the school program.

The parents of students in schools can oftentimes offer insightful perspectives on priorities for education (Leithwood, 2002). Furthermore, Leithwood contends that in some instances parents may provide explanations for the reasons why some students are not responsive to instruction or to interventions applied in their interests. When parents appreciate quality instruction, they can be the strongest supporting force for teachers and administrators, ultimately improving the quality of education that their children receive (Leithwood).

Within a supportive school culture, group problem solving or collaboration can lead schools in becoming more effective and efficient (Leithwood, 2002). Leithwood reported that supportive environment encourages differing viewpoints of participants. It is an atmosphere where open discussion of ideas is welcome and recognition of the unique attributes and contributions of each member are appreciated (Leithwood).

School councils can assist to decentralize authority on the school level, however their decision-making capacities are often advisory and do not infringe upon the authority of the local school board (Peterson Del Mar, 1994). As Peterson Del Mar suggested, when there are a larger number of decision makers, the results often include better decisions and better implementation because of the wider range of experience and expertise of the members. School councils are often useful, according to Peterson Del Mar, as an individual administrator does not possess all the solutions to the many problems that occur in schools. He also noted that community representatives often

decrease the influence of a single voice and often times give credence to the more representative whole and in most instances, people tend to act on or support decisions in which they had a part. To reap the benefits of the shared decision-making process, school councils must concentrate only on the important issues (Peterson Del Mar).

Many potential problems are associated with the shared decision-making model (Peterson Del Mar, 1994). Peterson Del Mar proposed that in this process, members are forced to assume different and challenging roles. For instance, principals have to learn to share the authority role and likewise, teachers may be hesitant to challenge authority (Peterson DelMar). Parents may fear that controversial issues will be minimized or set aside at the first sign of argument (Peterson Del Mar).

There are additional problems associated with implementation of shared governance or shared decision making (Peterson Del Mar, 1994). Peterson Del Mar noted that it is a time consuming process and that constituent members often have to abandon old habits and adopt new ways of thinking. Everyone involved must understand at the onset, that shared decision-making is difficult work and those involved must be willing to put forth their best effort (Peterson Del Mar).

Generally effective councils have a diverse membership with all strata of the school community being represented (Peterson Del Mar, 1994). Peterson Del Mar contends that it is important to represent the various ethnic, racial, and social groups present in the school community and he also notes that many effective school councils have students, administrators, certified and classified staff, parents, and community representatives. This inclusion of a broad range of representative council members

increases the overall council strength by building on each person's experience and knowledge (Peterson Del Mar).

School councils improve the school's effectiveness and are more successful when the entire school community is kept abreast of council discussions and decisions (Peterson Del Mar, 1994). These school council members must report information to the groups they represent. Peterson Del Mar's examples, included parents reporting to the Parent Teacher Association, and teachers reporting to their grade levels or content departments. School councils, however, must keep in mind that they answer to the school board and should respect the limitations of their power and school council members must also assume accountability for the decisions they make (Peterson Del Mar).

Payne (1996) reported that a major influence on improving achievement for children of poverty is related to the relationships that are established in schools. Further, she learned that the most important aspect of learning for these students pertains to relationships. In developing such relationships, schools assist students in becoming successful when they develop support systems to demonstrate that adults in the building care about students. According to Payne, the school's major focus is to strive to create an environment that promotes student achievement. Adults in the school, and those connected to the school, must be cognizant that they serve as role models for students (Payne).

Parker and Leithwood (2000) conducted a study of five schools gathering qualitative data through interviews from teachers, students, parents and administrators. The purpose of their research concerned the utilization of school councils on schools and

classrooms. The results of this study indicated a weak positive to negative influence of school councils on schools and classrooms. However in this study, some school councils were determined to be more influential citing a facilitative principal who utilized a collaborative team approach. Most importantly, more influential councils were found in schools which historically enjoyed a history of extensive parental involvement.

Principals often feel threatened by the establishment of school councils in their schools (Conley, 1993). As Conley noted, the thought that someone else should make decisions for the school causes some principals to feel that their own leadership is somehow threatened. However, school principals who embrace the strengths of their school councils, often have an opportunity to improve and transform their schools (Conley).

The principal's leadership style is an important factor in the school council's effectiveness as posited by Etheridge (1990). His research found the principal has a definite impact on the successful implementation of the school council. This factor was supported as he studied seven school councils in Memphis, Tennessee. Etheridge learned that principals who exercise "laissez - faire" or more democratic forms of leadership encouraged councils to work more cooperatively. Consequently, his research revealed that the more authoritarian principals inhibited the cooperative functioning of councils by withholding information from the school administration and central office levels. He also found that teachers not supportive of the shared decision-making process were noted as inhibiting the cooperative functioning of the school council. These findings indicated that councils function more cooperatively and openly when council leaders are strong. When school council members cooperate with their chairperson, and when members are fully

informed and comprehend the council's role, it was determined that school councils operate more efficiently and effectively (Etheridge).

Through an analysis of the processes that site-based teams utilize in decision-making and planning, research has indicated that the school district must provide clear directions concerning the goals and processes of team management (Bauer & Bogotch, 1997). In this study, district office assistance and support are also needed for the school council in developing effective communication and decision-making skills. Bauer and Bogotch also contend that at the school site, school leadership must arrange adequate and regular time for school councils to meet and communicate with the school stakeholders on issues concerning goals, authority, and power. For many school councils, the researchers noted that arrangements for meeting places and times do not normally fall under the auspices of the teachers, parents, and staff but are typically attended to by the school principal. In fact, the principal's role becomes less of directing and telling others what and how to execute tasks to a role of facilitating and collaborating (Bauer & Bogotch).

It is important that all participants involved in the school council process develop communication and decision making skills (Bauer & Bogotch, 1997). This study called for a change in school leadership which transferred power and responsibility to council participants. A measure of recognition and respect accompany these emerging new roles from the implementation of shared decision-making in school councils (Bauer & Bogotch).

In a review of the original study, Bauer, Bogotch and Park (1998) considered the implications of support provided along with site practices of school councils. The critical elements under consideration in this study were those of training, recognition, influence, and administrative support. The study found that the practices of the school council relating to trust, scope, and decision-making processes strongly impacted the quality of school decision-making; further, it could improve the quality of educational services. These findings tended to support the idea that shared decision-making team practices contributed to important outcomes and benefits for the school (Bauer et al.).

It is evident that the nature and process of shared decision-making will evolve over time, and stakeholder perceptions will change depending on the degree of involvement of the local council (Yanitski, 1998). Yanitski believes that as council members gain experience and become comfortable working with each other; their impact will be increasingly more powerful and effective. Yanitiski purports that in this process, decision-making parameters should be established for each local council, keeping in mind that "good" decisions are ethical, and are based on sound educational practice. Thus, these shared decisions are always made in the best interest of students (Yanitski).

As a continued and critical component of the success of school councils, the school principal is a key factor as he or she works to implement shared decision-making (Yanitski, 1998). Therefore, Yanitski contends that principals who exhibit traits of transformational leadership are considered to be effective because these principals are open, trusting, and willing to avail information to the council members. Shared decision making principals are not critical, according to Yanitski, and they tend to be non-judgmental, always considering multiple viewpoints of various constituent groups. In the

shared decision-making process, the school principal's role will change, yet it is acknowledged that he or she is still ultimately responsible for operation of the school and for student achievement (Yanitski).

In conjunction, Yanitski (1998) also addressed several negative aspects of shared decision-making as well as the school council process. Yanitski says that while constituents of school councils often feel they have input and representation in the decision-making process, in many instances their decisions are limited by financial constraints. Additionally, service on a school council or board reflects a commitment of time, an increased workload, and increased stress due to the emotional intensity of issues addressed (Yanitski).

In further analysis, Yanitski (1998) indicated that in order for the shared decision-making or school council process to be effective, trust is an essential element. He suggested that all members of the decision-making body must trust the principal and other members to be ethically professional in making decisions. Furthermore to be effective, all decisions must be made in the best interest of students.

Measuring the impact and effects of shared decision-making in isolation is a difficult task (Oswald, 1995). Oswald believed that shared governance or the use of a school council in isolation does not improve student achievement. His research revealed however, that the combination of governance with a focus on improved classroom practice, may account for improvements in student achievement. Oswald indicated that improved achievement is dependent upon the innovations being implemented at the school site. For example, is technology utilization emphasized in the school? Is there a school improvement initiative in place (Oswald)?

Summary/Conclusion

This literature review discussed the implementation of school councils and the available research concerning their role as components of the school's professional learning community. The literature review also explored research findings related to the use of shared decision-making as a venue for school improvement; in addition, research on effective school council practices was included. The purpose of the study was to determine constituent groups' perceptions of Georgia school councils' impact on student achievement.

Those who lead quality organizations realize that efficiency is increased if they seek to satisfy the many needs of the members of their organization (Glasser, 1990). Thus, quality schools and their supportive structures are institutions where differences among people are celebrated and where priorities are placed on student's well-being and achievement (Johnson, 2005). For this reason, the school council can be considered part of the school's professional learning community. Importantly, in professional learning communities, emphasis is placed on student learning within an atmosphere of collaboration that exists among the various school constituents (Eaker et al., 2002).

The reviewed literature has supported the idea that school councils are intended to improve the quality of education for students (Bauer, Bogotch & Park, 1998; Leithwood, 2002; Lontos, 1994; Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Pharis, 2005). However, just a change in school governance in itself or the implementation of the shared decision-making process will not likely improve teaching and learning in the classroom (Lange, 1993). Thus, the existence of a school council used in isolation is not likely to improve student achievement (Oswald, 1995).

importance of issues for which they make decisions (Pharis, 2005). Sharing the responsibility in school decision-making along with the participation of the school council in schools offers an opportunity to more efficiently solve educational problems and improve student achievement (Yanitski, 1998). Similarly, effective school council usage can increase accountability for all school stakeholders in the educational process and can therefore offer an opportunity to improve achievement for all students (Pharis).

Chapter III

METHODS

This study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate perceptions of school council members concerning the implementation of Georgia school councils as an education reform effort. The purpose of this research was to determine if constituent groups had a perception that Georgia school councils positively affect student achievement. Constituent groups are comprised of principals, teachers, parents, and business representatives.

This study was guided by a mixed methods research design. Campbell and Fiske (1959) first utilized mixed method research as they sought to validate psychological traits. Mixed methods research incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in a single study (Creswell, 2003). The purpose of this type of research design is to expand understanding from one method to another and to converge or confirm findings from different data sources.

Quantitative data were gathered from a survey, which was developed by the researcher. The survey was designed to gather qualitative data from an open-ended question. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered from two focus group interviews, which were held with school councils during a regularly scheduled school council meeting.

Chapter 3 provides an explanation of the methodology related to ethical considerations, research design, limitations, population, sample, participants,

instrumentation, procedures, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Ethical Considerations

Permission was requested and obtained from the VSU IRB to implement this research (Appendix A). Participants in the study provided information through completion of a survey or an interview. Each participant who gave interview information was aware that responses were being electronically recorded by means of an audio recording device. All completed surveys and audiotapes were kept under lock and key. All surveys and audiotapes were destroyed upon completion of the study.

All participants in this study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that there would be no penalty for choosing not to participate or for choosing to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were told that they could obtain a copy of the results of this study by contacting the researcher. School councils that participated in the focus group interviews were informed that they could receive a presentation of the findings of the research.

Research Design

The framework for this study was the concurrent triangulation research design. This particular design was chosen because it allows for possible confirmation, cross-validation, or corroboration of findings (Creswell, 2003). According to Creswell, the concurrent triangulation model is an example of traditional mixed methods research and an advantage of this method is the possibility of establishing valid and substantial findings. Because data are collected concurrently in this model, the time spent in data

collection and analysis is often shortened as compared to the amount of time needed for a sequential approach.

Limitations

Creswell (2003) contends that every research design has inherent limitations and there are several limitations with the concurrent triangulation research design. He notes that the study of a phenomenon through the use of multiple methods requires effort, determination and expertise of the researcher. The comparison of the results of analyses of different forms can be difficult (Creswell). In addition, the interpretation of conflicting results may be confusing if it should be the case that this possibility arises (Creswell).

The survey administered in this research employed the use of the Likert scale. The Likert scale has limitations when used in survey research. The Likert scale may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by participants, creating a possibility for the gathered data to be imprecise (Best & Kahn, 1998). The scale is often used in opinion research because of its ease of development, the wide range of application, and the possibilities for efficient administration to a large number of respondents (Best & Kahn).

Study participants were not identified in any way. When respondents are allowed to complete surveys in anonymity, viewpoints or themes indicating their true feelings may emerge which respondents might not otherwise share in face-to-face interviews (Merriam, 2002). While all surveys were completed anonymously, respondents could answer a survey by responding with how they *should* feel as opposed to how they really feel (Best & Kahn, 1998).

The focus group interview also has limitations as a qualitative data gathering strategy (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). While it is possible to gather useful and often

insightful information using this technique, participants could have been hesitant to share important experiences in a group setting due to shyness or unwillingness to answer in the company of strangers or unfamiliar surroundings. Sometimes one or more members could tend to dominate a conversation or deviate from the purpose at hand. Good interviewers establish their purpose at the outset of the focus group interview and then ensure that the discussion remains on course (Bogdan & Biklen).

Another limitation of this research was that of non-response bias. When a large portion of the sample population chooses not to respond to a survey, concern is raised about the generalizability of results to the entire population (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006). It is not possible to establish for certain that respondents are similar to the total sample. Participants choosing to respond to the survey may be systematically different from non-respondents (Gay et al.).

Respondents may have strong feelings about the school council issue and may see school councils as being beneficial to improving student achievement. Non-respondents may have preconceived notions that school councils are unnecessary or useless, and may have little impact on student achievement in general.

Random selection of participants from a stratified sample of schools was employed to reduce the possibility of non-response bias. When participants are selected at random, the probability of selecting a representative sample is improved and differences in groups that do occur are more likely the result of chance and not the result of other factors (Gay et al., 2006).

Delimitations

The study was limited to individuals who serve on school councils of public schools in the VSU, Valdosta, Georgia, service area. Data gathered in this research may also be limited by the fact that participants who completed the survey or took part in interviews were required to currently serve on a Georgia school council in this 41-county area.

Parents, teachers, administrators and community members not serving on school councils might possibly offer additional viewpoints that have not been considered by the researcher. Additionally, this research does not involve data gathered from students. There is the possibility that students might also provide insight into school council issues not previously related by adults or considered by the researcher.

Participants

Participants for this study reside in South Georgia. They are school administrators, teachers, parents and business representatives who are members of school councils for public schools. Participants were selected at random from a stratified sample of schools in the three RESA districts served by Valdosta State University.

Stratified random sampling is a technique used by researchers to select a sample of participants that proportionately replicates the population from which they are drawn (Gay et al., 2006). When participants are selected at random, inferences can be made concerning the population based on responses of the sample (Gay et al.). The criterion established for participation in this study was that the participant must be a current member of a school council for a public school in Georgia in one of the three RESA Districts served by the university.

Sixty elementary school councils from the VSU service area were chosen to participate in this study. Twenty schools from each of the three RESAs served by VSU were selected as the sample for the study and each of these schools were mailed four surveys. A total of 240 surveys were distributed.

The following demographic data for sample schools were taken from the Georgia Department of Education website. The schools in the sample had a student population ranging from 176 to 1,102 with a mean of 549 students. On average, 67% of the student population of sample schools were identified as being eligible for free or reduced lunch. An average of 14% of students in the sample was identified as receiving special services of some kind. Ninety-three percent of the sample schools were noted as Title One Distinguished Schools. This distinction indicates that these schools receive federal assistance in serving an at-risk student population and that they have achieved their academic goals for several years. Ninety-five percent of the sample schools had attained "Adequate Yearly Progress" for the most recent school year.

Instrumentation

This research sought to determine the perceptions of constituent members of Georgia school councils and to specify whether school councils positively impact student achievement. Survey research was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The survey study is a common type of research in the social and behavioral sciences. This research methodology is often used to assess opinions of individuals and is useful in assessing respondents' positions on various aspects of a topic (Thorndike, 2001).

The researcher designed the survey and interview questions used in this study. Questions on the *School Council Survey* (Appendix B) were aligned to the research

questions for the study. This section provides the rationale for utilizing survey research methods as the primary venue for obtaining quantitative data. It provides an explanation for the collection of qualitative data from surveys and focus group interviews and it also provides a discussion of the validity and reliability issues that were established for the survey.

The survey used in this research consisted of fourteen questions from which quantitative data were gathered and one open-ended question which supplied qualitative data. The first five questions solicited demographic information about school councils and school council members. Council members were asked to provide data concerning their tenure on the school council, constituent group representation, their council's number of members, and the number of yearly meetings. A mean was calculated for each question. Council members were also asked to indicate whether the chairperson of their council was a principal, teacher, parent or business representative.

Questions six through ten on the survey were determined to assess council members' perceptions on school councils' influence on student achievement. Council members were asked to complete a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (Coded 1) to strongly agree (Coded 5) indicating their perceptions for various questions concerning the purpose of the school council, the school council leader's ability to impact student achievement, best practices that school councils may or may not implement to improve achievement, and the impact of the school council law to improve student achievement in the state. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each question.

For questions eleven through fourteen, school council members completed the Likert scale to indicate their perceptions of various school improvement issues. Those

questions were related to school council members' opinions of whether there was a school improvement initiative in place at the local school site, their perceptions as to whether the school council had input into the school improvement plan, and whether they perceived that improved communication resulted from the school council process. School council members were also asked if they felt that the school council was considered a valuable component of the school's professional learning community. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each question.

The school council survey had one open-ended question. The open-ended question gave participants an opportunity to express their feelings about school council effectiveness to improve student achievement. The open-ended survey question also gave respondents a venue for expressing additional viewpoints that may not have occurred to the researcher but may prove to be of value in the present study. Qualitative data were also taken from focus group interviews. Open-ended responses collected from the surveys and responses collected through focus groups were analyzed for consistent themes (Merriam, 2002).

Focus groups are group interviews. In this research, the focus group was convened on two different occasions with two school councils. As Bogden and Biklen (2003) indicate, focus groups can vary in the degree of structure they employ. The focus groups for this research were informal and semi-structured. The focus group discussion began in each instance with general questions concerning the school council, practices of the school council, and constituent participation in school council issues (Appendix C). Council members were given an opportunity to discuss the major school council practices that they thought might affect school improvement and/or student achievement.

Good interviewers ensure that participants are at ease; they build rapport with interviewees and develop trust (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Bogdan and Biklen also posit that good interviews are characterized by rich data which elicit respondent's true perspectives on issues.. The success of the focus group in providing data is often based on the researcher's skills in questioning and extending the responses (Bogdan & Biklen).

The survey in this study was assessed for content validity. A survey instrument that has been created must be critiqued for content validity and must be field-tested (Roberts, 2004). The question pool was created with input from teachers, parents, community members and central office and building level administrators. It was administered in a trial test to eleven principals who served as chairs and members of their respective school councils. It was also administered to approximately thirty-nine elementary school council members who did not participate in the study. These trial administrations allowed for survey questions to be clarified with input from these individuals who had personal experience in working with school councils and who possessed a working knowledge of the Georgia school council law.

The changes that were suggested through the field test were limited to clarifying or improving the wording of questions and the addition of questions concerning the demographic makeup and tenure of council members. Many respondents in the field test suggested that the Likert scale should be modified to include choices of "neutral" as well as "don't know" as the two responses have different meanings. The neutral response, (Coded 3) was included in the final survey.

It was also suggested that the survey questions be limited to the front and back of one page, due to a concern that respondents may not be willing to spend more time on a

One individual at each meeting was asked to be responsible for collecting the completed surveys and for returning them in an enclosed postage-paid, self-addressed envelope that had been included with the original survey directions and information. To insure confidentiality, completed surveys were placed in envelopes, sealed and returned to one person on the school council.

In the event that the response rate for return of surveys was low on the first administration, it was anticipated that a second mailing of the surveys would be necessary. It was decided that four surveys would be mailed to each of the original sample schools that did not return surveys for the first mail out. All directions for administration and the cover letter to the principal would be included in the second administration. It was decided however, that participation might increase if an opportunity existed for surveys to be returned directly through the mail to the researcher.

Two school councils in the VSU service area were asked to participate in focus group interviews. These schools were selected at random. The interviews were conducted with the entire school council of an individual school in each instance. Each focus group consisted of seven members. The building principal, two teachers, two parents and two business representatives were present for each interview. Each interview was recorded on audiotape.

Data Collection

As surveys were returned, each was coded with a number that allowed the researcher to track individual surveys. No attempt was made to correlate responses with individuals or to identify schools. The purpose for this coding was not to identify participants but to identify the school councils that had returned the survey. The

quantitative data from each survey was then entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program in preparation for data analysis. Each response to the open-ended question was recorded on a tally sheet as qualitative data. Each of the interviews was recorded on audiotape. Qualitative data gathered in the interview process were transcribed into written form by the researcher.

All surveys were kept in a locked filing cabinet when they were not being entered into the computer by the researcher. The audiotapes were kept in the locked filing cabinet after being transcribed. All surveys and audiotapes were kept in a secure location under lock and key until the conclusion of the research. At the conclusion of the research all surveys and audiotapes were destroyed.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data taken from surveys were analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. Quantitative data from survey questions 6 - 14 were compiled and analyzed utilizing the SPSS computer program. Demographic information and response rates for each question will be presented in tables in chapter four.

In order to determine school council members' perceptions, survey questions 6 - 14 provided respondents with five options on the Likert scale from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. Responses of "strongly disagree" were recoded as negative two; while responses of "disagree" were recoded as negative one. "Neutral" responses were not eliminated from the analysis and were quantified as zero. Responses of "agree" were recoded as a positive one and "strongly agree" were recoded as positive two. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each survey question.

In the analysis then, means below zero are associated with a negative response

and means above zero are associated with a positive response. This method as well as descriptive statistics was employed to arrive at a determination of positive or negative participant perceptions to answer Research Question 1, "What are the perceptions of school council members concerning effectiveness of Georgia school councils in improving student achievement?"

In order to answer Research Question 2, a one-way ANOVA was used to determine the existence of a statistically significant difference between the means of the various constituent groups concerning their perceptions of school council's effectiveness in improving student achievement. Null and alternative hypotheses were established to answer Research Question 2, "Is there a statistically significant difference among constituent groups in the perceptions of school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement?"

ANOVA is a parametric procedure which tests hypotheses that involve the means of more than two groups (Thorndike, 2001). ANOVA is a parametric statistic that is normally used for ratio or interval data (Best & Kahn, 1998). It has been demonstrated, however, that ANOVA may be appropriate as a statistical procedure with the use of nominal or ordinal data. The procedure may still be appropriate when the assumption of normality is violated (Best & Kahn).

Research Question 3, "How do school council members perceive their role in factors of school improvement, communication and professional learning community?" was answered with quantitative data taken from surveys.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Research Question 4, "What school council best practices could be identified by the school council which they believe to positively impact student achievement?" was answered with qualitative data taken from focus group interviews and from the open-ended survey responses that were provided by respondents.

Qualitative data gathered from open-ended responses from the surveys and responses collected through group interviews were analyzed for consistent themes (Merriam, 2002). In the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data, the researcher reads through the data looking for words, phrases, beliefs or patterns of behavior, which repeat or stand out in the research findings (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). Coding categories are established from these words or phrases. Bogdan and Biklin suggest that sorting the descriptive data into coding categories is a crucial step in the analysis of qualitative data.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gather information from school council constituent groups concerning their perceptions of school councils' impact on student achievement. Chapter 3 provided a description of the methodology used to carry out the study. Specifically, ethical considerations, research design, limitations, population, sample, participants, instrumentation, procedures, data collection and analysis were discussed.

The concurrent triangulation mixed methods research design required that qualitative and quantitative data be gathered simultaneously (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative data were collected from responses to an open-ended survey question as well as from two interviews with school councils. Quantitative data were also taken from the surveys. The

quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Results and an analysis of data are discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

This study sought to determine constituent group perceptions on the effectiveness of Georgia School Councils to improve student achievement. Chapter 4 reports the quantitative and qualitative findings, which were gathered from written surveys and focus group interviews. These results are presented according to their usefulness in answering the research questions. Research questions 1 and 2 were answered quantitatively with data taken from surveys. Question 3 was considered to be of a quantitative and qualitative nature and Question 4 was answered qualitatively. In order to facilitate for the reader, the chapter initiates with a review of the study research questions followed by a presentation of gathered demographic data. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Demographics

Survey packets were mailed to 60 elementary schools with directions that indicated for principals to ask 4 school council members in each school to complete a survey. The directions asked that at least one teacher, one parent and one business representative currently serving on the school council complete and return the survey. The principal of each school was also asked to complete a survey. The administrator was then asked to return the completed surveys to the researcher. The first administration of the survey yielded an insufficient number of responses so it was determined that a second

mailing of surveys was necessary. The second administration of the survey resulted in the return of additional surveys.

One hundred thirty surveys were returned to the researcher for an overall response rate of 54%. Of the completed surveys, it was determined that 46 administrators, 34 teachers, 30 parents, and 20 business representatives had taken part in this component of the study by returning a survey. The majority of respondents were administrators while the fewest number of surveys came from the business representative constituent group.

The following demographic data were taken from the written surveys. According to data taken from the survey, responding school councils have an average of seven members with a standard deviation of 0.93 and members have served an average of 2.81 years with a standard deviation of 1.7. Principals served as chairperson of local school councils in a majority of the cases. At the time of this study, it was determined that the principal serves as chairperson 63.6 % of the time while a parent serves as chairperson 27.6 % of the time. It should be noted, that the law was changed during the implementation of this study. The new school council law now requires that a parent serve as chairperson of the school council. Completed survey results revealed this change near the conclusion of the data-gathering period.

Results

Research Question 1. What are the perceptions of school council members concerning effectiveness of Georgia School Councils in improving student achievement?

School council member perceptions were determined using descriptive statistics and an analysis of the quantitative data that were compiled from surveys. Survey items were designed to answer Research Question 1 and a mean and standard deviation was

calculated for each constituent group. This analysis allowed the researcher to quantify council member perceptions concerning the purpose of the school council. Other variables that were similarly measured included the perceptions of the positive influence that the school council may have on student achievement, the influence that the leader of the school council may have on student achievement, improved student achievement through the state of Georgia as a result of the school council law, and whether the school council implements best practices which may influence student achievement. Means are provided in Table 1, and values enclosed in parentheses represent standard deviations.

Table 1

Summary of School Council Member Mean Perceptions of School Council's Impact on Student Achievement

Survey Item	Principal	Teacher	Parent	Business Rep
Purpose	.77 (.91)	1.41 (.78)	1.07 (0.94)	1.56 (.68)
Positive Influence	.13 (.88)	0.76 (1.07)	1.13 (0.97)	1.22 (.65)
Leader's Impact	.86 (.77)	1.00 (0.92)	1.07 (1.02)	1.56 (.51)
Impact in Georgia	-.57 (.98)	0.35 (0.85)	0.60 (0.97)	0.33 (.69)
Best Practices	-.14 (.93)	1.05 (1.01)	0.93 (0.94)	1.11 (.32)
N	46	34	30	20

All constituent groups responded moderately positive in their perceptions of the purpose of the school council (M = 1.11, SD = 0.89, n = 130). The business representative constituent group responded with the strongest perception to this question. Teachers also exhibit a strong perception concerning the purpose of school council to

improved student achievement. While still positive, principals' responses indicated an overall lower perception of the purpose of school councils and principals responded with the lowest perception of the four constituent groups for the survey item. Seventy-eight percent of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

School council members exhibited an overall moderately positive perception of school council's influence on student achievement ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 1.01$, $n = 130$). Principals had the lowest perception of all constituent groups for this survey item while parents and business representatives have a more positive viewpoint, and teacher perceptions are only moderately higher than those of principals. The smallest constituent group indicating agreement with the survey item was that of principals at only 36%. Seventy-three percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that school council positively impacts student achievement.

When asked about the leader's ability to impact student achievement, school councils' overall perception for this survey item was moderately positive ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.86$, $n = 130$). This response indicates agreement. Principals, the largest constituent group participating in the survey, demonstrated the lowest perception of all constituent groups for this item. The business representative constituent groups indicated a strong perception that the leader of the school council can influence student achievement as he/she guides the school council.

The survey item concerning school council member perceptions of the school council law's impact on student achievement in Georgia garnered a weak positive response ($M = 0.08$, $SD = 1.02$, $n = 130$). Parents indicated the strongest perception of agreement. Principals' overall response to the question was negative and this was the

lowest perception recorded in the study. Only 13% of principals agreed with the statement. Only 32.8 % of all respondents agreed with the statement.

School council member perceptions related to school councils' implementation of best practices to impact student achievement revealed a weak positive response ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 1.09$, $n = 130$). The weakest response for this item again came from principals, and only 26.1 % of principals agreed with the statement. Parents' perceptions of best practices implemented by school council were stronger but teachers and business representatives have a more positive perception concerning this survey item.

Research Question 2. Is there a statistically significant difference among constituent groups in the perceptions of school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement?

In order to answer the second research question, the SPSS computer program was used to compare the means of the constituent groups concerning council members' response for one survey item. The survey item used for this analysis was, "The school council positively influences student achievement in my school."

The ANOVA indicated the existence of a significant statistical difference in responses of various constituent groups, $F(3, 126) = 10.18$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.195$. In this case, the F-ratio is in the critical region, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is supported. The analysis revealed a small effect size.

The ANOVA was originally chosen to determine if a significant difference existed between the four groups. However, in the analysis, it was determined that Levene's Test of homogeneity of variance indicated a violation of the assumption. For that reason, the Brown-Forsythe Robust Test of Equality of Means was evaluated. This

representation of the non-parametric ANOVA yielded results which were consistent with original findings.

The SPSS computer software was utilized to employ the post hoc test, Dunnett C. A post hoc test is an additional hypothesis test, which is done after an ANOVA, to determine exactly which mean differences are significant and which are not. The statistical procedure indicated that the principal constituent group scored statistically significantly lower than the other three constituent groups. No other groups were found to have scored statistically significantly different in their perceptions of school councils' positive influence on student achievement.

Research Question 3. How do school council members perceive their role in factors of school improvement, communication, and professional learning community?

A summary of survey results of school council member perceptions concerning their role in the school's professional learning community, improved communication, and school improvement issues are addressed in Table 2. Means are presented and values in parentheses represent standard deviations.

Table 2

Summary of School Council Member Mean Perceptions of School Council's Role in Professional Learning Community, Communication and School Improvement

Survey Item	Principal	Teacher	Parent	Business Rep
Professional Learning Community	0.50 (1.17)	0.53 (0.99)	0.67 (0.96)	1.44 (0.70)
Communication	1.09 (0.96)	1.18 (1.11)	0.73 (1.01)	1.78 (0.43)
School Improvement	0.96 (0.78)	0.82 (1.22)	1.07 (0.94)	1.56 (0.51)
N	46	34	30	20

Principals and teachers recorded weak positive responses for their perception of the school councils' contribution to the school's professional learning community. Teachers' attitudes were positive and the business constituent group indicated the strongest positive perception that they felt the school council was a valued component of their school's professional learning community. The overall mean indicates a positive weak response from all groups ($M = 0.64$, $SD = 1.05$, $n = 130$).

When school council members were asked to give their perception of whether they felt they had input into the school improvement initiative in their local school, all groups responded moderately positively ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.94$, $n = 130$) and school council members expressed a strong perception that school improvement initiatives were taking place in their schools. Teachers' perceptions indicated the weakest positive

response. Business representatives' and parents' mean responses were the strongest recorded for this survey item. Principals also indicated a moderately positive perception.

School council members responded positively when questioned about their perceptions of improved communication which can result from the school council process ($M = 1.08$, $SD = 1.06$, $n = 130$). School council member parents recorded the weakest positive response. Teachers, principals, and business representatives indicated strong positive perceptions for this survey item.

Research Question 4. What school council best practices could be identified by the school council which they believed to positively impact student achievement?

Research Question 4 was answered qualitatively with data taken from surveys and interviews. The following comments were collected from principals, teachers, parents and business representatives. Several consistent themes emerged from the discussions and written comments, and were analyzed as qualitative data. Those consistent themes were related to issues of student achievement, school improvement, communication, and parent involvement. School council members also conveyed negative perceptions of the ability of school councils to impact student achievement and those data were determined to be of value to the study.

Principals taking part in the study offered few comments concerning school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement. A positive idea that emerged from the qualitative data concerning student achievement, however, was related to the impact that parents can have on their own children's education. As one principal stated, "The school council can impact student achievement when the parents who are on the council become actively involved with their children's education. My hope is that

when school council parents go out and talk with other parents, everyone gets more involved.” The statement also illustrates this principal’s belief in the importance of positive relationships with parents.

Teachers were much more optimistic than principals in their perception of school council effectiveness in improving student achievement. Teachers often cited the council as being a platform for lauding the success of the school and exhibiting the school’s academic accomplishments in the community. Some teachers felt that the school council could impact achievement as the school council process offered an opportunity for cohesiveness or a feeling of collaboration to be established between constituent groups in some councils. As one teacher said, “Not only does having a school council help improve student achievement, it also forms a positive and collaborative bond between students, parents, teachers and administrators.”

As advocates of children, many teachers saw the school council process as being a very positive way to focus on student achievement and on their most important concern—the students. As another teacher stated, “The number one goal of our school council is student achievement. They realize that it’s all about the kids. Therefore, we strive to address the academic issues in a way as to bring about positive changes.” This teacher was referring to utilizing the school council as a venue to improve the quality of services which her school provided for students.

Parents provided many comments which were related to school councils’ impact on student achievement. Parents often noted that they actually enjoyed serving on the councils and were interested in school-wide issues as well as in providing input based on a parent’s perspective. Parents expressed a desire for the schools to excel academically;

however, whenever schools struggled with accountability issues, parents also felt the pressure to explain reasons for students' inability to excel academically. Parents often remarked that student achievement was greatly influenced by the work of teachers and principals.

They did feel that they could offer insight into what was often considered a lack of student achievement or a failure to perform on the part of the student. As a parent noted, "Principals and teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement, but parents know more about the specific needs of their own children. Serving on the school council gives parents an opportunity to see the difficult work that is done in schools each day for the students." Many parents felt that the school council could impact student achievement but that it took each constituent group doing its part to make sure that all children were provided the quality education they deserved.

The topic of school improvement emerged as a common theme from the qualitative data analysis. Principals' comments concerning their use of the school council as a means of school improvement were more forthcoming. Some principals worked with their school councils and reported that they used the council as a platform for involving the local board of education in improving their school. As one principal noted, "I use my school council to bring facility needs to the attention of my superintendent." While principals sometimes felt uncomfortable making such requests directly to their superintendent, they often noted that they felt more support in making the requests on behalf of their school councils.

Another principal noted the usefulness of the school council in writing the school improvement plan or garnering support from the community as he said, "The school

council is very effective and provides a supportive voice when working on things like the school improvement plan, Special Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), and new events or activities that take place in the school.”

Additional school improvement issues in which principals utilized the school council process were those of curriculum and instruction. As noted by one principal, “I basically try to do my best keeping our council informed on the different programs, curricular changes and instructional practices that take place in the school. We have conducted “walk throughs” with our council and allowed them input on certain equipment and material purchases. We also allow members to have a copy of the school improvement plan and they do get an opportunity to give input.”

One teacher expressed a desire to involve all constituent groups in the school improvement process. The teacher stated, “I would like to see the parents and business partners have an opportunity to be more directly involved in the implementation and development of our ongoing school improvement plan.” The teacher viewed this involvement as a secure method for obtaining support from these two constituent groups.

Teachers also expressed an appreciation for their membership on the school council and demonstrated a positive perception of the school councils’ value in improving the school. Teachers recognized the benefits of involving viewpoints from those within the school as well as those not normally involved in educational decisions. As noted by a teacher participant, “School councils are a great way to include and incorporate the suggestions of teachers and outside observers (parents and business representatives). Many effective and unique ideas come from this group. This is a valuable addition to our school!”

Teachers continued to note that for school council members to be effective, they must be familiar with their purpose for serving on the council. "The school councils could be more effective if the members better understood their roles. The council should make a positive difference and provide any assistance to the school that is needed. This impact will only be positive if the council is utilized properly," commented one teacher.

Parents also offered their own views on improving the school through the use of the school council. "Student achievement is best left to the professional educators. Parents can best help the school improve by offering ideas for student safety, student awareness and improving public awareness," stated one parent. Another parent felt that the school council should be supportive of the school principal as he or she works toward issues of school improvement. As the parent stated, "I feel the council can support the principal by providing and agreeing with recommendations to help the school. However, he may have certain limitations placed on him by the board of education."

All four constituent groups made positive comments concerning the improved communication that they perceived as a by-product of the school council process. This improvement in communication was also recognized as having a positive impact on student achievement.

The principal constituent group exhibited the strongest perception of the school council in improving communication between all concerned groups and the community. Principals provided many positive comments concerning the school council's ability to improve communication. As a principal stated, "I feel the most important role of the school council is the communication it provides between school and community." Another principal confirmed his perception of school councils' communication benefits

when he expressed, "School council impacts communication. This communication with parents can impact their understanding of testing, test data, and adequate yearly progress (AYP), which leads to them being more concerned and more involved in what is going on in the classroom."

While this section of the study addresses communication benefits realized as a result of the school council process, the principal's perception that communication is connected to student achievement and parents' positive impact on their children's education is also a noted factor.

Teachers also had a positive perception of school councils' impact on improving communication. A teacher supported this by stating, "Our school council is effective in informing the business reps and parents of what is going on in the school. As a result, the business reps and parents talk up the achievement of students and improvement in the school which is always a positive thing for our school community."

Teachers also felt that the improved communication benefits of the school council related to student achievement. Another teacher stated, "The most important thing the school council has done is improve communication. It has made parents and businesses more aware of what schools are doing to improve student achievement."

At least one parent declared his/her belief concerning the improved communication that results from implementation of school councils. The parent stated, "School councils are the voice of the parents and staff. The school council discusses issues and concerns of parents or staff and reports the issues and concerns to the superintendent and/or school board."

Principals and teachers made positive comments concerning the school councils' effectiveness in improving parent involvement. A principal noted, "The school council at my school is a valuable tool for parental involvement. It is also a good way to inform business and community partners about the great things going on in our school." A teacher stated, "We have some wonderful parents who serve as members of our school council. Parents have good ideas and we are always looking for ways to involve our parents."

Parents exhibited an appreciation for the difficult task that teachers and administrators are faced with each day in schools. A young father serving on a school council stated, "I was elected in October. The short period I have been involved in the council has opened my eyes to the dedication from the administration and the teaching staff. The council is committed to improving the school and its relationship with our community." Another parent felt she had been elevated in the eyes of the school council as is reflected in her statement, "Not only does the school council improve student and school achievement, as a parent, I was provided inside information that I would not have known if I had not been a part of the school council. It really showed me a lot about different areas of the school environment. It gave me the opportunity within a small group to voice my thoughts and concerns. Research was actually being done to make changes to better our students... Working side by side with the teachers was great! They really listened and looked at each parent as more than a parent; they looked at us as another educator." While the statement is noted in the parental involvement section of the study, connections to student achievement and communication are also evident. The following comment from a parent also demonstrates this idea: "The school council is a

good voice for concerns, ideas and achievements. It allows parents to have an active voice.”

Several study participants perceived the school council process as having little to no impact on student achievement; in addition, some saw councils as being of little value to the school in general. This viewpoint was derived from the negative comments which were taken from the written surveys and the focus group interviews.

Principals/administrators were most vocal among constituent groups in their criticism of the school council process. This constituent group cited the implementation of school councils at the school site as being an additional task in an already difficult working environment fraught with problems and near impossible objectives. Principals also cited issues such as council member apathy, council’s advisory limitations, and members’ lack of knowledge in working with educational issues all being weakening in the overall school council’s worth. While much less vocal and more limited, teachers, parents and business representatives also provided minimal negative input on the school council process.

Qualitative data analysis determined that school councils choosing to implement the following best practices may impact student achievement. School councils should be led in an attempt to focus council attention on issues of student achievement and school improvement. Support from the principal is important to the success of the work of the school council. School councils should take a problem solving approach as they examine school related issues. It is vitally important to involve parents. All constituent groups must be represented and should be encouraged to participate in the school council process.

Summary

This study focused on Georgia school council members' perceptions related to the effectiveness of school councils to improve student achievement. Chapter 4 presented the quantitative and qualitative findings. Descriptive statistics were utilized in the presentation of findings. Written comments and transcripts of focus group interviews were analyzed for consistent themes.

All school council constituent groups exhibited positive perceptions of school councils' impact on student achievement. Descriptive and inferential statistics revealed that the principal constituent group indicated weak positive perceptions but scored statistically significantly lower than the other three constituent groups. Several school council best practices which may impact student achievement were also presented.

Chapter 5 provides an indication of the reasoning applied to answer the research questions. It also provides a summary and discussion of the findings that were presented in Chapter 4. The discussion involves quantitative and qualitative data analysis, recommendations for practice, and identification of topics for additional study. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Chapter V

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Study

Over the years, many reform efforts have been launched to improve the quality of the public schools. The passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) ensured that schools find ways to address the needs of all children and to involve parents in their children's education (NCLB, 2002). Certainly, there is no single quick-fix to the many problems which plague the public schools; however, schools that transform themselves into professional learning communities may successfully meet the many challenges that schools face today (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). As Schmoker (2006) indicated, all supportive school structures can be considered part of the school's professional learning community.

Georgia school councils were legislated with passage of the *A-Plus Education Reform Act* (2000) (*O.C.G.A. § 20-2-85*) (*Official Compilation...2008*). According to this law, school councils were to provide a governance arrangement in schools which would involve parents in the education of their children, and improve student achievement. This study examined perceptions of constituent groups to determine if they felt that Georgia school councils positively affect student achievement. Furthermore, data were analyzed to determine if a significant difference existed among the various constituent groups concerning their perceptions of the impact of school councils on student achievement.

The study also identified best practices of school councils that may improve student achievement.

Oswald (1995) noted that the existence of a shared governance arrangement in itself, would not likely improve student achievement, and Weiss (1993) suggested that if used improperly, a shared governance arrangement could be used to slow the pace of change. Other researchers (Bauer et al., 1998; Leithwood, 2002; Lontos, 1994; Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Pharis, 2005) reported that school councils or shared governance arrangements provided benefits for schools and their implementation may improve achievement of students.

Four research questions were posed in this study. The study was comprised of survey research and two focus group interviews and data gathered from these methods were used to answer the research questions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and an ANOVA. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed for consistent themes. Chapter 5 provides a summary of findings, discussion of findings, and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1 sought to determine the perceptions of school council members related to the effectiveness of Georgia school councils to improve student achievement. Five items on the school council survey were designed to assess school council member perceptions of their impact on student achievement. The five items addressed the following topics: purpose of the council, the councils' positive influence on achievement, the council leader's ability to impact achievement, the school councils' impact on achievement throughout Georgia, and school councils' implementation of best

practices. Overall positive mean responses were recorded for all constituent groups for all five topics.

Research Question 2 examined whether there was a statistically significant difference in the constituent groups concerning their perceptions of school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement. The ANOVA was calculated on the constituent group means. It indicated that the principal constituent group scored statistically significantly lower than the other three constituent groups. No other statistical differences were found in constituent group means.

Research Question 3 examined school council member perceptions of their role in factors of school improvement, communication, and professional learning community.

The third research question assessed school council members' perceptions of school councils' role in the three stated factors of school improvement, communication, and professional learning community. Positive mean perceptions were recorded for each of the three factors.

Research Question 4 sought to determine if school council constituent groups could identify best practices of the school council which they believed to positively impact student achievement. Qualitative data gathered from open-ended responses from the surveys and responses collected through group interviews were analyzed for consistent themes (Merriam, 2002). Several consistent themes emerged from interviews and written comments. These themes or practices are categorized as:

1. Focus on Student Achievement and School Improvement
2. Principal Support
3. Take a Problem Solving Approach

4. Find Ways to Involve Parents

5. Encourage Participation

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the current study were somewhat consistent with the findings of Parker and Leithwood (2000) who reported that aspects of school councils exerted a weak positive to negative influence on schools and classrooms. Principals in the current study exhibited the weakest positive perceptions of school councils' impact on student achievement. Mean responses for two survey items, principals' perceptions of school councils' impact on student achievement in Georgia, and principals' perceptions of best practices of school council to impact student achievement, were negative. These were the only negative indicators recorded from the quantitative data. These findings were consistent throughout the study as perceptions of school councils' impact on achievement in Georgia garnered the lowest overall response from every constituent group.

Teachers in this study exhibited a positive view of school councils' impact on student achievement. Weiss (1993) found that teacher morale and commitment are improved when teachers are allowed to participate in school decision making. Blasé and Blasé (2001) reported that this practice could improve teacher job satisfaction, productivity, and commitment to the organization. In the current study, teachers' perceptions of all of the five survey items related to student achievement were positive, and the question garnering the strongest response concerned their perceptions of the purpose of the school council. The topic recording the weakest positive response from the teacher constituent group was their perceptions of the improvement of achievement in Georgia.

Parents in this study responded positively when asked their perceptions of school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement. Several researchers (Glanz, 2006; Leithwood, 2002; Parker & Leithwood, 2000) have indicated the importance of parents in the education of their children and the importance of parents in school/community relationships. Parents surveyed in the current study expressed strong support for the school council leader's ability to impact student achievement and for their perceptions of the purpose of school councils. The lowest mean response recorded for the parent constituent group was their perceptions of the school council law to improve student achievement throughout Georgia.

Business representatives, the smallest group of respondents in the study, provided the strongest indication of agreement in their belief that school councils improve student achievement. All mean responses for business representatives were strongly positive with the exception of findings pertaining to improvement of student achievement in Georgia. Little research exists to verify the perceptions of the business representative group.

The analysis indicated that a statistically significant difference existed in the constituent groups concerning their perceptions of school councils' effectiveness in improving student achievement. The findings for Research Question 2 are consistent with findings of Research Question 1. From the data, it is apparent that principals exhibit a lower perception of the school council's ability to positively impact student achievement than do the other three constituent groups. Evidence exists in the literature to support the importance of the principal in school council or shared school governance implementation. Pharis (2005) found that a supportive principal was vital to the effectiveness of the school council. Peterson (1995) suggested that the principal would

face challenges in restructuring their schools to implement the shared decision making process. Additionally, Lashway (1996) reported that in the shared decision making process principals' roles would change from director to facilitator. Lontos (1994) also noted that the principal is the key element in school council success and the principal's role is to maintain the shared decision making process by assisting constituents to make the most appropriate decisions in favor of students. He indicated that for school councils to be successful, principals would likely alter their leadership style from authoritarian to a more collaborative approach. Pharis purported that school councils should leave daily school operations to the discretion of local school administrators and Conley (1993) posited that principals may be resentful of a governance arrangement in which they themselves did not make all school decisions.

Perhaps principals' perceptions revealed in this study were weak due to the fact that they felt school council processes undermine their own decision-making abilities and their authority to operate the school. Another explanation for the weak response from principals may be that they feel overwhelmed with the many responsibilities that accompany their position. As noted by one principal who participated in the study, "It's just one more thing to do."

School council members in this study demonstrated positive perceptions that school improvement was taking place in their schools and that they had input into the school improvement plan. When asked about their input into the school improvement initiative in their school, school council members answered positively ($n = 130$, $M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.94$). These findings are supported by Pharis (2005) who noted school councils play a role in the school improvement process and could be used as a vehicle for

school reform. Lontos (1994) reported that one of the purposes of the shared decision making process is improved school effectiveness. These findings of the current study are also consistent with the views of Glanz (2006) who asserts that schools are transformed by participation of community members and parents. He also reported improvements in school facilities, staffing, special programs and resources are by-products of this involvement.

Communication is vital to the success of any organization (Senge, 1990). According to Leithwood (2002) communication and access to information expands decision-making alternatives and creates likelihood that the best alternative will be selected. Open communication between council members and constituent groups is necessary for successful school council operation (Pharis, 2005). As he discusses community involvement in schools, Glanz (2006) insists “communication is critical for building and maintaining alliances with the community” (p. 33). Quantitative analysis of data from the current study indicated it is the perception of school council members that the school council process does improve communication ($n = 130$, $M = 1.08$, $SD = 1.06$). Means for this survey item were positive for all constituent groups; however parents indicated the weakest positive perception of the four groups.

It has been noted in the literature that schools which operate as professional learning communities are more likely to be successful in meeting the needs of students (Dufour et al., 2004). As school council member perceptions were assessed for this issue, it was evident that they displayed weak positive support that the school council was considered a part of the professional learning community in their schools ($n = 130$, $M = 0.64$, $SD = 1.05$). The business representative constituent group exhibited the strongest

support for this issue. While positive, perceptions of principals, teachers and parents were consistently low. Therefore, it is evident that school council constituent groups in this study demonstrate a weak perception that the school council is a valuable component of the learning community.

Implications for Practice

School council members in this study identified numerous best practices they perceived as contributing to improved student achievement. These practices are categorized as focusing on student achievement and school improvement, garnering principal support, taking a problem solving approach, finding ways to involve parents, and encouraging participation. The following is a literature-based discussion of each of the identified best practices.

Focus on Student Achievement and School Improvement. As he studied the work of school councils, Pharis (2005) identified several factors which enabled school councils to effectively address important school issues, one of which was the development of focus. Little (2002) suggested that a collective responsibility among school stakeholders for student success is associated with student achievement and that a school culture of professional community improves the capacity of a school to engage in change. As Anderson (2002) discussed qualities of effective schools, he pointed out that effective schools establish an environment where expectations are high with an instructional focus on academics that are broadly accepted by all school constituents.

In this study, it was determined that those charged with the responsibility of operating school councils and especially the school council chairperson must make a conscious effort to lead the council with the intention of informing members on issues of

student achievement and school improvement. This determination is consistent with the findings of Pharis (2005) which revealed that the school council should establish a clear plan of action. Similarly, the finding of the current study is also consistent with other research as espoused by Anderson and Davenport (2002), which indicated that a school environment must be established that focuses on the academics of reading, writing and math. Everyone must know the mission of the school (DuFour et al., 2004).

A suggested practice that evolved from this study involves focusing council member attention on student achievement at the outset of each school year on the school's report for adequate yearly progress. Principals noted that council members can be taught to disaggregate data to determine strengths and weaknesses in the instructional program. This activity can also serve to highlight the school's progress and can assist the council in determining steps needed to address problems in the school's comprehensive improvement plan.

As the school council determines its plan of action, it is important to focus on a few issues which are important to the council and school community (Pharis, 2005). All groups operate at different stages of development and some school councils may prefer to address issues of a more practical nature in their schools (Conzemius & O'Neal, 2002). While an inexperienced council may wish to discuss issues of student safety or facility needs at its outset, the focus is likely to move to more salient issues of teacher quality and retention, quality of instructional programs, and availability of instructional resources.

Over time and as school councils become comfortable with their roles as council members, they will begin to inquire about more important educational issues (Pharis, 2005). These discussions are more likely to have an impact on student performance as

administrators, teachers, parents and community members critically examine student achievement and school improvement.

Principal Support. One of the most important factors for successful school council operation is the support of a facilitative principal (Pharis, 2005). As Anderson (2002) indicates, principals and all school constituents must model the highest of expectations for the schools' instructional programs. They must demonstrate belief in and support for the school council or shared governance process and these views are consistent with the research of Blasé & Blasé (2001). Principals must also remain open-minded about council suggestions to improve education (Yanitski, 1998). Fairness and consistency are essential qualities that school principals must exhibit to build trust among school council participants (Blasé & Blasé). Glanz (2006) suggested that when properly utilized, the school council is a platform by which the principal can bring important issues to the attention of superintendents and school boards to improve the quality of their schools.

In the current study, principals were the largest constituent group exhibiting negative perceptions of the school council's impact on student achievement. They often cited that meeting the mandates of the school council law added to their responsibilities and that the school council had no impact on achievement and expressed difficulty in finding parents to participate in school councils. This finding is consistent with the views of Glanz (2006) who indicated that parents may be reluctant to participate but he also noted that proactive principals who believe that parent involvement will improve student achievement will remain committed to involving parents in a continuous and meaningful way.

Take a Problem Solving Approach. Leithwood (2002) found teams or groups are more efficient at approaching educational problems than are individuals. He suggested that improved problem solving capacities of groups are facilitated through the creation of supportive environments in which opposing viewpoints are encouraged, ideas are expressed openly, group limitations are recognized, and where members' viewpoints are appreciated.

Those charged with operation of school governing councils should listen intently to members (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). Another suggested practice which arose from this study is that the principal or council chairperson should ask the school council to supply the issues that need attention. If the council desires to begin with discussions of school safety, traffic problems on the school campus, or facility needs, be supportive of their efforts. After reviewing issues of this nature, those charged with the operation of the council should begin to move the council to more salient issues of student achievement.

Find Ways to Involve Parents. The concept of parental involvement was a consistent theme that emerged in this study. Glanz (2006) contends that principals find ways to reach out to all parents within any given school community. He goes on to say that inviting parents to take part in school governance, leadership teams and advocacy groups can strengthen the school-community bond. He also suggests parent involvement may ultimately serve to improve student performance and decrease the achievement gap for ethnic groups. As Glanz pointed out, parents are children's first teachers. These findings corroborated the views of Leithwood (2002) who advocated improvement of the school program through involvement of parents in decision-making, governance and advisory capacities. Also according to Leithwood, parents can often offer insight into the

reasons why students fail to respond to instruction and can be powerful allies for schools when they develop an appreciation for the instruction being provided to their children.

Principals in the current study expressed strong support for parental involvement in the education of their children. "When parents become involved with school improvement and AYP, and see how these things affect their children, that's when we see things start to happen for kids," remarked one principal. When parents are aware of the school accomplishments they can become a source of public relations for the school. When students do not achieve satisfactorily, parents also can be resourceful in providing reasons for students' inability to respond to instruction.

Parents are often not professional educators and while their lack of expertise in educational issues may sometimes pose a problem, they may offer insights that have not been considered previously by principals or teachers (Leithwood, 2002). As one teacher in the current study noted, "The principal has found some good parents to serve on our council. They want to see the school do well and the school council is a great way to involve our parents." Parents themselves, often demonstrated an appreciation for serving the school through membership on the school council. As one parent indicated, "The school council is a good voice for concerns, ideas and achievements. It allows parents to have an active voice." Parent involvement is required by NCLB (2002) and the school council process is a means by which teachers and principals can insure their involvement. Newmann (2002) contends that effective schools are institutions which seek to involve parents in the education of their children. The current research study suggests that those charged with the operation of school councils might improve effectiveness by insuring adequate parent representation on the school council.

The current study recommends that the number of parents serving on the school council should not be limited and should at least equal the number of teacher representatives. Those charged with the operation of school councils should ask parents to be involved in the school council and listen to parent input.

Encourage Participation. The success of democracy is dependent upon strong public schools and schools depend on strong affiliations with all stakeholders (Johnson, 2005). Johnson contends that organizational support structures are effective when they assist stakeholders to build a common purpose for learning and that the quality of a school is measured growth for all students.

The school council is a support structure which can facilitate the involvement of all school stakeholders to involve them in democratic decision-making processes (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). Glanz (2006) asserts that school-community associations will improve student achievement. These findings are corroborated by Leithwood (2002).

Blasé and Blasé (2001) state that it is important for school council members to be aware of the issues taking place in school council meetings. School council meetings or meetings of elected groups must be announced beforehand and minutes of meetings must be made available (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). The current study revealed that the school council chairperson must establish an agenda and stick to it in school council meetings.

Principals must find creative ways of involving the two largest groups affected by the school council process, teachers and parents (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). Their study also revealed that school councils should insure that all groups are well represented on the council and that attendance is expected at the regularly scheduled meetings. Participants

in the current study suggested that this practice may be as simple as reminding council members of upcoming meetings through email or newsletters.

Recommendations for Further Research

Certainly, there are additional aspects or viewpoints of the school council issue which warrant exploration. This study sought to collect survey data concerning school council member perceptions from only 60 schools located in South Georgia.

Consideration should be given to expanding the scope of exploration to include a statewide survey of study participants. A statewide survey would ascertain additional insights concerning opinions of school councils that were not uncovered with this more limited sample population. Since the study examined perceptions of school council members concerning student achievement, additional research should target practices of school councils in high performing schools as compared to lower performing schools.

Principals provided the majority of responses for this study. Another recommendation for future research would include only principals. Additionally, the opinions of each constituent group could be targeted for separate research studies. A purely quantitative or qualitative study of one of these constituent groups would provide important insights into school councils' impact on improving student achievement.

While the survey and interview process for this study focused only school council members, consideration should be given to the opinions of non-school council members. Non-council members' opinions may uncover additional view points not considered in this research.

A final recommendation concerns the recent change in the school council law requires that a parent serve as chairperson of the council. A study might examine many

aspects of this change. Several possibilities include: perceived improvement in school council efficiency since the required change, perceptions of the principal concerning the change, perceptions of school improvement or student achievement since the change.

Conclusion

The school council concept, as it is a way to involve parents, teachers and members of the business community in the difficult work that is carried on in schools each day. These individuals want to see the school succeed in every way. The responsibility and demands of operating a school today are massive and it's likely that this additional input may offer useful viewpoints and recommendations that may impact student achievement in a positive way.

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Appendix A: Valdosta State University – IRB

Grants and Contracts

Address 1500 N. Patterson St. • Valdosta, Ga. 31698-0429
Phone 229-259-5045 • Fax 229-245-3853

Valdosta State
University®



VSU IRB Number: **IRB- 02140-2007**

MEMORANDUM

TO: Wendell Stone
125 Mary Day Road
Ambrose, GA 31512

FROM: Dr. Green T. Waggener, Chair
Institutional Review Board
Valdosta State University

SUBJECT: IRB-02140-2007

DATE: April 20, 2007



Your request for approval of "Georgia School Councils: Constituent Member Perceptions on Improving Student Achievement" has been received and reviewed. Based on the materials you provided, your protocol has been approved under the **Expedited** Review category.

This approval is effective for one year from 03/22/07 to 03/21/08 based on the research protocol described. You are required to report any change in methodology to the IRB. If you need additional time, you must inform the IRB and request an extension by contacting the IRB Administrator at Valdosta State University, Dr. Green T. Waggener at VSU. Dr. Waggener can be reached by phone at (229) 249-4921 or E-mail at gtwaggen@valdosta.edu.

cc: Dr. Charles Fulton

Appendix B: School Council Survey

Georgia School Council Survey

Directions: Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your completion of this survey will be accepted as your consent to participate in this research project. Should you decline to participate or decide not to complete the survey, you are free to do so without penalty. Any questions about the survey process may be directed to the VSU IRB Chair by calling 229-259-5045 and stating your concern. You may also contact the researcher, Wendell Stone, at 912-359-3371, if you have additional questions or concerns. Thank you again for your assistance.

Demographics

1. I have served on the school council for _____ years.
2. I am a/an: ___ Administrator ___ Teacher ___ Parent ___ Business Representative
3. My school council has _____ total members with _____ teachers and _____ parents.
4. My school council meets _____ times each year.
5. The chairperson of my council is: (Please circle one)

Principal Teacher Parent Business Representative Other

Please circle your response for the following questions using the scale below.

- | | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| 1-Strongly Disagree | 2-Disagree | 3-Neutral | 4-Agree | 5-Strongly Agree |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------------|
6. The purpose of the school council is improved student achievement.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Student Achievement

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7. The school council positively influences student achievement in my school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. The leader of the school council can influence student achievement as he/she guides the school council. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. The school council law has improved student achievement throughout Georgia. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. The school council implements best practices which impact student achievement in my school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

School Improvement

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. There is a school improvement initiative/program in place at my school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. The school council has input into the implementation of the school improvement initiative at my school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Improved communication is an outcome of the implementation of the school council process. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. At my school, the school council is considered a valuable component of our professional learning community. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix C: School Council Interview Questions

Georgia School Councils: Constituent Group Perceptions on Improving Student
Achievement

Possible interview questions:

The following questions are designed to provide a direction for an interview.

These questions may not be followed word for word but they are provided to give an idea of the types of questions, which may arise during the interview, and they give an idea of the information that may be gleaned from such an interview.

1. Why were you interested in serving on your school council?
2. What are the biggest positives/negatives in your school?
3. What are the issues that your school council usually considers?
4. Do you feel that you have a voice in the operation of your school?
5. What constituency do you represent on the council?
6. Do you feel that your constituency is concerned about the operation of your school? Have they ever asked you to submit an issue to the council?
7. Does your school council have any characteristics that allow you to effectively confront school issues?
8. Do you have any evidence that the council affects student achievement?
9. Has achievement improved since you have been on the council? How do you know?
10. Recent legislation has made the school council law more flexible and seems to have taken some of the power from the school councils. What do you think will be the result of this legislation and how does it make you feel as a council

member?

11. Is there anything you'd like to change about the operation of your school council?
What could your council do to improve the achievement of students in your school? Is serving on the school council worthwhile to you?
12. Do you feel that students benefit from the existence of the school council? How?
13. What's the role that your principal plays on your school council? Is he or she proactive in seeking resolution to any problems that the council has encountered within the school?
14. What would make school councils more effective in improving student achievement?

Appendix D: Cover Letter to Principal

