

Response to the
**Review of School
Governance in
Victorian Government
Schools**

Jacinta Allan, MP
Minister for Education Services
March 2006



Foreword



A technical analysis of existing legislation conducted as part of the *Review of Education and Training Legislation* identified the need to consolidate and modernise school council powers and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of school councils in government schools. In addition, developmental and implementation work associated with the *Blueprint for Government Schools* highlighted the need for subsequent work in school governance issues.

Accordingly, in March 2005, I commissioned a review of school governance in Victorian government schools with the release of a discussion paper calling on school communities, stakeholder groups and the wider community to consider current and potential governance arrangements for government schools.

The terms of reference of the review were to:

- provide advice on the role, membership structure, processes and support needs of school councils
- provide advice on the legislative framework for governance of government schools
- propose a set of revised governance principles that meet contemporary standards
- provide advice on the role of the local community in school governance and the contribution that school councils can make in building the capacity of their local community.

I am very grateful to all groups and individuals who responded to the discussion paper. The breadth, depth and quality of these responses contributed in a very significant way to the successful outcomes of the review.

A close analysis of the responses to the discussion paper and other consultations led to the development of a comprehensive report outlining twenty-two recommendations. These are reproduced in the full report available on the Department of Education and Training's website <www.det.vic.gov.au>.

I am pleased to accept all the recommendations outlined in the report and I have instructed the Department of Education and Training to take the necessary steps to implement these recommendations.

A number of the recommendations arising from this review relate specifically to the legislative framework within which school councils operate and have been incorporated into the new Education and Training Reform Bill arising from the *Review of Education and Training Legislation*. These changes consolidate the powers of school councils and clarify their roles and responsibilities as the governing bodies of self-managing schools operating within a strong government school system.

This review has highlighted the significant contribution that school councillors and school communities are currently making to school governance. I look forward to strengthened partnerships between schools and communities as these partnerships are vital for a system of excellent government schools focused on improved learning outcomes for all students.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jacinta Allan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial 'J'.

Jacinta Allan, MP
Minister for Education Services

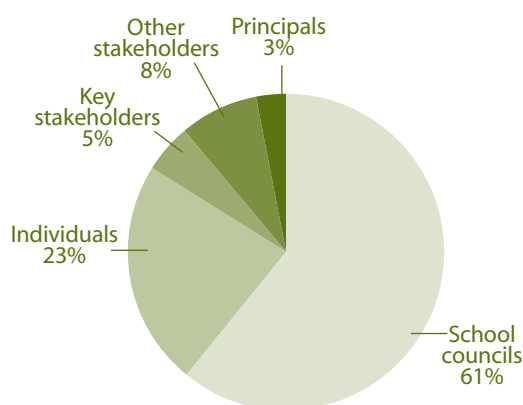
Introduction

The review involved significant consultation with school communities, stakeholder groups and others interested in school education in Victoria. The consultation process included:

- release of the discussion paper
- advertisements in metropolitan and regional newspapers
- information on the Department of Education and Training's website
- direct invitations to school councils to make written submissions
- eleven roundtables held throughout Victoria at which school councillors, local communities and other stakeholders expressed their views on the themes raised in the discussion paper and on any other matters relating to the powers, functions and operations of school councils
- community forums for several members of parliament.

A total of 132 written submissions to the discussion paper were received by the closing date 30 May 2005. The following pie chart shows the main sources of responses.

Review of School Governance submissions



This report outlines the review recommendations and identifies priority action areas for implementation by the Department of Education and Training.

SCHOOL COUNCIL OBJECTIVES, FUNCTIONS AND POWERS

Review recommendations

- That a statement of school council objectives and functions be inserted in the education and training reform legislation.
- That school council powers be consolidated and clarified in the education and training reform legislation.
- That a general statement giving school councils all powers necessary for them to carry out their functions be included in the education and training reform legislation.
- That a statement of school management areas outside the functions and powers of school councils be included in the education and training reform legislation.
- That the Department of Education and Training develops clear guidelines on the respective roles and responsibilities of school councils and the role and expectations of principals with respect to school councils.
- That differential school councils based on a reduction in the role, functions and powers of some school councils to a more limited focus not be created.
- That the current legislation be amended to enable school councils to develop cooperative arrangements through the delegation of specific responsibilities, in some cases to another body such as a Local Administrative Bureau.

Comment

To assist school councils to meet their statutory requirements and other governance obligations there is a need to clarify their functions and powers. The Education and Training Reform Bill articulates for the first time the expected objectives, functions and powers of school councils. In order to ensure that school councils focus on their role, the Bill also articulates what school councils do not have responsibility for. The role of a school council is to develop the school's strategic plan, to determine the educational policy for the school and allocate resources that will enhance the educational opportunities of students at the school. It is recognised that there is some confusion about the respective roles of school councils and school principals and that providing greater clarity would be useful.

Priority action areas

School council functions are now articulated in the Education and Training Reform Bill.

School council powers have been consolidated and clarified and included in the Education and Training Reform Bill.

The respective roles and responsibilities of school councils and principals will be clarified in both legislation and operational support material.

The power of school councils to delegate powers, duties or functions has been included in the Education and Training Reform Bill.

Cooperative arrangements for and/or between school councils will be developed and supported.

GOVERNANCE STANDARDS

Review recommendations

- That the Department of Education and Training develops a set of governance principles and standards for school councils.
- That the Department of Education and Training develops further advice on the implications of a change to legislation to enable the Minister to impose duties and obligations on individual school councillors.

Comment

Public bodies are expected to operate within a sound governance structure. There is a need to develop governance principles and standards for school councils that are consistent with those applying to other public bodies and take into account the volunteer status of school councillors.

Priority action areas

A set of governance principles and standards for school councils will be developed.

COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING

Review recommendations

- That a community strengthening statement for school councils be included in the overall statement of functions to be inserted in the education and training reform legislation.
- That the Department of Education and Training identifies and promotes examples of good practice in community/school partnerships, drawing on local, national and international practice.

Comment

It is recognised that there is mutual benefit if schools and their communities work together. Engaging and supportive relationships within and between schools, other education providers and the wider community can result in a more strengthened and productive community. Schools have the opportunity, through their school council, to develop and promote these relationships. For the immediate school community this may mean providing a forum for parental involvement reflecting cultural and social diversity and for the wider community it may mean identifying the local needs of the community through, for example, their Local Learning and Employment Network.

Priority action areas

The importance of schools engaging with the wider community has been articulated in the Education and Training Reform Bill.

Examples of good practice in community/school partnerships, drawing on local, national and international practice will be identified and promoted to school communities.

SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP

Review recommendations

- That the current arrangements for the size of school councils of between six to fifteen members be retained and that the Department of Education and Training makes school communities better aware of the membership flexibility available to them under the current legislative and administrative framework.
- That the requirement that parents and community members must constitute a majority of school councillors be retained.

- That the 'DE&T parent' category of school council membership be retained but that the Department of Education and Training provides clearer information on the application of this category to reduce stakeholder concern.
- That a specific category of school council membership for students not be mandated, but that the Department of Education and Training identifies and promotes the ways in which students can be involved in school council decision-making processes, where appropriate.

Comment

It is recognised that there needs to be greater clarity about some aspects of membership criteria of school councils and that depending on its current circumstance a school may need to alter the size of its council and the configuration of the membership categories. This flexibility is available within the policy context that ensures that parents and community members form the majority of members. The community member category is an opportunity to involve the wider school community in the governance of the school.

Priority action areas

School communities will be made better aware of the membership flexibilities available to them under the current legislative and administrative framework.

Clearer information on the application of the 'DE&T parent' category will be developed.

Ways in which students can be involved in school council decision-making processes will be identified and promoted.

SCHOOL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

Review recommendations

- That the Department of Education and Training develops a simplified process for school council elections, including the requirement that elections take place through an annual election meeting.
- That the current term of office for school council membership of two years, with half the council standing for election each year, be retained.
- That the current timing of school council elections between the start of the school year and 31 March be retained.

Comment

It is important that school governance is supported by an electoral process that is democratic, open and easily managed. The current terms of office and timing of elections for school councils is considered to be appropriate for schools. However, there is a need to change the existing process to make it less complex without compromising fairness.

Priority action areas

A simplified process for school council elections will be developed with the assistance of the Victorian Electoral Commission and through consultation with key education stakeholders, including the requirement that from 2007 elections take place through an annual election meeting.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNCILS IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Review recommendations

- That the Department of Education and Training affirms the important role school councils play in school improvement.
- That the Department of Education and Training provides adequate support for school councils to enable them to carry out their role in school improvement.

Comment

An effective school will have a school council that is actively engaged in the development of the school strategic plan and the annual implementation plan. The new School Accountability and Improvement Framework recognises the school council as the governing body of the school and its important role in the accountability and improvement process. This role is reflected in the functions of school councils in the Education and Training Reform Bill. Specific support materials and training will be developed and offered to school councils to support them in this role.

Priority action areas

The important role school councils play in school improvement will be affirmed by ensuring adequate support for school councils to enable them to carry out their role in school improvement.

SCHOOL COUNCIL SUPPORT

Review recommendations

- That the Department of Education and Training develops a communications and support strategy for school councils, including but not limited to:
- the identification and/or development of training packages for school councillors
- the development of a clear set of support protocols for school councils for regions and central office
- the development of a school council website
- the identification and publication of best practice in school governance
- the development and/or revision of support documents for school councils, including *Making the Partnership Work: Roles and Responsibilities* and *Making the Partnership Work: Rules and Procedures*
- the identification of resource requirements to support the strategy.

Comment

There is a clear need for better support for school councils and individual school councillors. There is great demand for a range of supports that cover the breadth of school council responsibilities. Prospective school councillors or new councillors need information as do councillors with specific roles, for example school council president or executive officer. A Training and Support Framework has been developed to coordinate and prioritise the activities to be undertaken centrally and regionally and to support school-level initiatives.

Priority action areas

A communications and support strategy for school councils will be developed, including but not limited to:

- the development of flexible training packages for school councillors
- the development of a consolidated school council website containing support materials, legislation and regulations
- the development of a clear set of protocols for regional and central office support for school councils

- the identification and publication of best practice in school governance
- the revision of existing support documents for school councils, including *Making the Partnership Work: Roles and Responsibilities* and *Making the Partnership Work: Rules and Procedures* to reflect high-quality governance information and changes to legislation.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Review recommendation

- That the review recommendations be considered within the context of an analysis of the obligations placed on school councils under the *Public Administration Act 2004* and that further advice be provided to the Minister for Education Services on this matter.

Comment

The clear role for school councils is to enhance the educational opportunities of students at the school and to ensure that its decisions affecting students are made with the best interests of the students in mind. To ensure that school councils are in a good position to meet any challenges in the future they need to be provided with ongoing support relating to relevant legislation and the impact of major Department of Education and Training initiatives on schools.

Priority action areas

School councils will be supported by the Department of Education and Training to continuously improve their own performance based on legislative requirements under the *Public Administration Act 2004*, *Education Act 1958* and *Financial Management Act 1994* and government standards.

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