

## **National Focus Area – School Committee 2014**

### **“School - Family Connection, a bigger Picture”**

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#### Background

Historically, school committees' roles and responsibilities were perceived as being to support their children through schools' fundraising efforts. The new Cook Islands Administration Guidelines were introduced in 2002 and simultaneously the focus for school committee members also increased to include decision making, policy making and ratification, and ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone in the school.

In 2012 the revised Education Bill was passed by parliament. The legislation now states that the role of the school association is to:

1. Promote the intention of the school
2. Facilitate the further development of the school
3. Foster community interest in educational matters
4. Increase cooperation between parents of students attending the school, other members of the community, staff and students of the school
5. Participate in the governance of the school
6. Give or assist in giving financial or other resources or services for the benefit of the school
7. Help maintain the school grounds, buildings and equipment
8. Participate in an appraisal of the principal as required.

Under the Learning and Community section of the Education Master Plan one of the key aims for the focus area relates to upskilling and resourcing management, the administrators, teachers and parents. To support the changes in approach expected of School Committees it was acknowledged that training and development opportunities for parents to expand their governance role at all levels of education would be required

From 2008 onwards the ministry held school committee capacity building workshops, distributed manuals to schools on their increased roles and responsibilities and through media encouraged parents to attend their school Annual General Meetings.

The purpose of the review is to consider the increased role and responsibilities of school committee members in Cook Islands schools. Is the change working? Are parents/school committees actively participating in their new roles? Why do they participate? How do they participate?

## OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

The purpose of the review was to consider the increased role and responsibilities of school committee members in their schools. The evaluation was conducted using the following headings:

### **Relevance**

How relevant are the increased roles and responsibilities of school committee members in contributing towards the meeting of the requirements of the Education Act (2012) and the EMP.

### **Effectiveness**

Are school committees effective in meeting their role as identified by the Act?

### **Efficiency**

Are the school committees trained to fulfil their requirements? Were there any research or findings to justify the adoption of the new role? What link was identified suggesting that this is the way forward for student achievement?

### **Quality**

Are the inputs from the school committee members having a worthwhile impact on students' learning or student well-being?

### **Sustainability**

What factors may enhance or constrain the sustainability of current school committee roles and responsibilities processes in the future?

### **Methodology**

The research for this report was undertaken during the school review cycle for 2014. Sixteen schools were visited, of which:

- 9 were on Rarotonga and 7 on the Pa Enea (1 Northern Group island school and 6 Southern Group islands schools)
- Three schools were secondary schools, ten were area schools and 3 were primary schools.
- 13 were state schools and three private
- 4 schools have Board of Directors and the rest school committee members

### **Documents**

Annual Plan, Strategic Plan, Staff handbook, Review Policy, School committee policy, and Annual Report These documents were viewed at the schools or at the MoE.

School Committee Minute documents:

Information was gathered from AGM and school committee meeting minutes during school reviews.

### **Interviews**

Information was gathered from interviews with Principals, School Committee Chairpersons and mostly executive committee members. Questionnaires were issued to some school's school committee members. As review visits are of different lengths, not all committees were interviewed to the same extent with interviews focusing on what was considered important to that committee.

In the majority of cases the chairperson and school committee members were interviewed to determine the extent of implementation of their new roles and responsibilities. The chairpersons and school committee members also often offered unsolicited comments on the reluctance of parents to be on the school committee and also their degree of confidence in the new governance role.

### **Desk Study**

Research was carried out on (See Bibliography) the school- family connections.

Evaluation Indicators:

1. AGM dates
2. Number of meetings per year
3. Member attendance to meetings
4. Most discussed topics in meetings
5. Number of policies reviewed per meeting
6. Professional development

### Findings:

Thirteen of the schools reviewed in 2014 held their AGM before the 30<sup>th</sup> of March and one held its meeting in May prior to the school review visit and two in April.

A small number of schools are consistently holding meetings once every two months whereas for most schools their meetings are held whenever there is a perceived need. Five schools on Rarotonga mostly discuss matters via the internet and evidence for discussions were presented. For more than half of the schools reviewed their schools committees were unable to meet regularly due to not meeting the quorum.

Most school members are long standing members who have served on the committee for between three and five years. In one particular school five members have served for more than three years with two new members. Such a combination of old and new members is seen in a number of schools.

The majority of agenda items for School Committee meetings concern fundraising efforts and new projects. Very few schools have minutes that clearly show evidence of

discussion about school policies or school plans. There is often evidence of policies being ratified by the school chairperson without committees meeting.

Two school committee manuals were distributed to schools, but there have been no follow-up workshops held at all to train committee members in their role in the current year.

**Here are responses to some questions directed to school committee members:**

**Question 1 – What do you think your role in the school committee should be?**

The School Committee role should be:

- The link for children to the teachers
- Assist the Principal in strategic plans, monitor and evaluate performance of teachers
- Meet with teachers on a regular basis to discuss and make plans in achieving goals
- Provide service and maintenance and help improve resources
- Act as Board of Directors and be encouraged to make recommendations/decisions for the school
- Work with teachers and the communities
- Absence of a prescribed authority does not provide 'incentives' to be productive at school work plan.

Chairperson should:

- Provide directions/vision that the island want/intend the school to follow/achieve
- Support the Principal and give advice in terms of management of the school
- Have the authority to communicate to MOE heads and school management

**Question 2 - What would you recommend to encourage more parental participation and support for the school?**

More parental participation and support for the school:

- Involve parents in decision making and give them feedback on what is happening or planned to happen in the school
- Clarity in standard of learning for their children including quality of teaching
- Should demonstrate student achievement, fairness and acknowledge staff performance
- Have kaikais
- Quarterly reporting on the progress of the whole school
- Hold training sessions for parents how they can assist their children and their learning.

- Have parent get together with teachers and get to know each other.

### **Question 3 – How often do you hold school committee meetings?**

Five out of 12 members say they meet monthly, four said they meet when necessary and three were not sure when they meet.

### **Discussion**

The key aim in the EMP is to expand governance role for parents at all level of education and to encourage active participation in all decision making processes and enjoy confidence in the quality of their child's education. The 2012 Education Act legislates more than a governance role for school associations.

Regardless of when AGM meetings are held a high number of parents turn up to meetings but these parents are reluctant to be elected on the committee. However, they voice their expectations that the principal and teachers should teach their children well. Encouraging member participation in document review is a chore according to one chairperson. Another said, AGM attendance is good but parents are reluctant to be members, work is a factor. It is perceived that parents are reluctant to be school committee members and those who do believe in the education of their children and also in a small way have pride in their village school take on the role. Statements from school committee members indicate the seriousness these members take to their role and the aspirations they would like to see for their children.

School fundraising activities and school programmes are the predominant agenda matters discussed in school meetings. Policy review is generally delivered to committee members for their consideration and then expected to be ratified by the chairperson in meetings. In some cases, the principals request that the chairperson call a meeting for the express purpose to sign off policies. Proper processes for reviewing policies are seldom adhered to by the schools for reasons such as meetings deferred, no quorum, lack of interest in discussing policies, strategic plans and school programmes.

It was expected that the increased role and responsibilities of school committee members would contribute towards meeting requirements of the Education Act and the Master Plan. However, during school review visits it was evident that this is not so. A number of factors are impeding the effectiveness of the roles and responsibilities bestowed on the school committees. For the past five years minimal training programmes have been held for committee members. A one off training programmes held in one of the outer island school in 2012 was on how to create a vision and mission statement for the school, the roles and responsibilities of the school committee members, strategic planning and finance management. Since then there have been none. A couple of brochures written on the same topics were distributed to all schools.

They were initiatives set for failure right at the start because there were no follow up sessions to ensure the members clearly understood what all the activities meant and how they relate to school achievements; even media presentations lacked clarity in roles except the need to participate in AGMs or meetings. It is evident from committee comments that they clearly need training. However, one chairperson said, the absence of a prescribed authority for the school committee does not provide 'incentive' to be productive at supporting school work plan. If this is the case some fact finding should be initiated whether committee 'incentives' would encourage more participation and for EMP outcomes to be met. Perhaps holding Chairperson annual conferences could be an incentive to encourage more participation.

Parents in most outer islands see their role in supporting their children's education through fundraising efforts and taking part in school activities. Reviewing policies and strategic plans are seen to be the Ministry and Principal's responsibility. There are school committee members especially on Rarotonga and in a few schools in the outer islands that are aware of and acknowledges their new role and responsibilities. However, there is indication of a very slow turn-over of review processes; at times there is a reluctance towards meeting guidelines and agenda matters due to involvement in work or other matters not related to their schools. Holding quorate meetings and procrastinating on important school matters is always a challenge. When meetings are held regularly policies could be reviewed and finances will always be up to date.

The sustainability of the roles and responsibilities of school committee members occur when:

- Meeting regularly and following agenda matters
- MoE provide training workshops throughout the year
- Encourage network throughout the schools in the outer islands and on Rarotonga

According to Dr Karen Mapp, a lecturer in the Harvard Graduate School of Education (2002), research has shown that parent involvement in schools help students earn higher grades, boost test scores and improve social skills. Does it really make a difference? According to research the answer is yes.

Arguably affirming parent involvement in schools help students earn higher grades and improve social skills is based on the American education standards, from the 'No Child Left Behind' Act. The 'No Child Left Behind' legislation states that schools must pass a certain percentage in literacy and numeracy in order to qualify for further assistance from the state. It showed a clear and growing commitment to the role of families not just to improve achievement but to hold schools accountable for results.

All of New Zealand's state and state-integrated schools have boards of trustees. The board of trustees is the Crown entity responsible for the governance and the control of the management of the school. The board employs staff in the school, is responsible for

setting school's strategic direction in consultation with all stakeholders, and ensures schools provide a safe environment and quality education for all its students.

In the Cook Islands literacy and numeracy standards are not measures for committee performance but for student achievement at certain levels in the schools and it can also be argued that committee support in some way is also indirectly responsible for child's performance but this has yet to be proven and no school committee members nor parents for that matter are held accountable. Private schools have school boards and in their case they manage their own schools with assistance from the Ministry of Education under a memorandum of understanding agreement.

International schools are guided by the amount of funds they receive and managing those funds lies solely in the hands of schools and boards of trustees and there is always the challenge to improve standards in the knowledge that hard work equates student achievement and funding. Whereas in the Cook Islands the Ministry of Education fund the schools according to the school roll on a monthly basis therefore parents would have to raise funds to meet the needs of the school.

## **Conclusion**

Lessons learned from the international scenarios discussed in the report encourages reflection and further encourages the search for a workable solution for the Cook Islands to develop capacity building for our school committee members. Worthy of consideration is the fact that our schools are scattered and divided by the Pacific Ocean.

## **Recommendations:**

It is recommended that the Ministry prepare and implement a training package for school committees and that those who complete the programme be certificated. There are four terms a year and training could be done once a term not only for training but serve as reminder and reinforce what was studied previously. In the past schools committee training programme should start in April after the AGM by ministry personnel and following training workshops. Training programme should go for two to three years. Annual training workshops should be for new members or non-certificated members only. MoE could hire and train trainers to train interested individuals on each island. Ideally this would be a member of the school community or perhaps a retired teacher or an interested staff member of the school.

The authors of, 'Why do parents become involved? (2005), state that the most influential factor in involving families is the way school welcomes and reaches out to families. They recommended that families need to be 'empowered' to engage in their children's education. It is not a new idea but is a new perspective on this issue.

The following suggestions are made for schools and teachers to increase capacity for parental involvement by:

- Building principal's leadership skills in creating a welcoming school climate. This can be included in new principals' or principals' conferences.
- Empower through encouraging teachers to reach out to parents during report days, sport activities or during student-centred activities
- Offer a variety of ways for families to be involved and issue invitations for involvement personally
- Encourage staff and families to attend student-centered activities

Enhance family members' capacity for effective involvement by

Communicating with families about their role in their children's education

1. Offer specific suggestions for families
2. Providing information about curriculum and learning expectations
3. Give families positive feedback on their involvement and
4. Creating and supporting family and community networks

## **Bibliography**

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Appendix (1)

School Committee Interview Sheet



*Ministry of Education*  
 Maraurau o te Pae Api'i

PLANNING, POLICY & REVIEW

SCHOOL COMMITTEE INTERVIEW SHEET

SCHOOL:	DATE:
Management Folder: School committee book: School policy: Minute book: Updated: How often is it referred to? Policy –  <b>Procedures</b> Do you participate in school self review processes?	
Reporting/meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principal -how often?</li> <li>- In what form?</li> <li>- How do you know its effective?</li> </ul>	
School Committe Annual Project: Programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Style of engagement?</li> <li>-</li> <li>- Community engagement</li> <li>-</li> </ul>	

<p>Evaluation and Review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- does this happen</li> <li>- what is evidence</li> <li>- how often</li> </ul> <p>Records -</p>	
<p>Executive responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how often are support meetings held?</li> <li>- Evidence of minutes?</li> </ul> <p>Chairperson current job:</p> <p>Secretary current job:</p> <p>Treasurer current job:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student Behaviour management?</li> <li>- Budgets &amp; inventories (how do you keep track? Plan?)</li> </ul> <p>How well do you feel supported in the community to carry out your responsibilities</p> <p>Any other issues?</p> <p>In the past year how often have you helped out at your child's school?</p> <p>To what extent do you know how your child is doing socially at school?</p>	

Signed: Review Officer .....

Date: .....

School committees perform a very important function. They have an essential role in ensuring that school-wide strategies are developed and that progress towards the realistic yet challenging goals we set ourselves is properly monitored and assessed.

