

## School Councils

### **What is a school council?**

A school council is a representative, school building-based committee composed of the principal, parents, teachers, community members and, at the secondary level, students, required to be established by each school pursuant to Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 71, Section 59C.

### **What is the reason the Education Reform Act calls for establishing school councils?**

Teachers, parents, and community members can become more committed to improving the schools and more supportive of the public school system when they enjoy the opportunity to serve or be represented on a school council that has a role in shaping the policies and programs of the school. One Massachusetts school system, which instituted site-based decision making and school councils prior to the statewide mandate, includes the following preamble in its guidelines for councils:

*Values behind site-based decision making through councils: [the council] improves student outcomes by uniting, in responsible participation, those closest to the teaching-learning relationship; [the council] creates through the development of a shared vision and planning a school environment which unites all members of the school community in a sense of belonging, commitment and growth.*

### **How does the councils' work relate to other provisions of Education Reform?**

Councils are an integral feature of Education Reform and are the main instrument for practicing the participatory site-based management that is called for in the Education Reform Act. Each school's efforts and success in meeting statewide standards will be an important component of the school council's needs assessment. In addition, as councils assist principals in preparing the school improvement plan, they will have a role in shaping the school's achievement of the professional development and parent involvement goals of Education Reform.

### **What are the educational benefits of site-based decision making?**

Site-based decision making places the school at the center of planning, goal setting, and budgeting for school improvement. It provides additional opportunities for teachers and administrators who are closest to the teaching learning process to be innovative and creative. Site-based decision making also allows teachers and administrators to work with parents and the community to become more responsive to the needs of a particular school's population. For example, the teachers at a particular school may find that, because of the characteristics of their students, they have a need for a particular type of in-service training

that is not offered or needed district-wide. Under site-based decision making, this school may be given the discretionary authority over staff development resources to meet this need.

**How does the establishment of school councils enhance the benefits of site-based decision making?**

School councils enhance site-based decision making because they expand the participation of the school community in its schools' decision making. The involvement of different groups on the council -- teachers, parents, and non parent community members -- provides the school with different and mutually complementary perspectives on its improvement goals and plans. In addition, by involving people who work in and support the school in the development of the school's improvement plan, the likelihood will increase that the plan will be successfully implemented.

## **Councils Responsibilities: School Improvement Plans**

### **What are the elements of the annual school improvement plan?**

The school improvement plan, as described in the legislation, has the following elements:

1. An assessment of:
  - The impact of class size on student performance
  - Student-to-teacher ratios
  - Ratios of students to other supportive adult resources
2. A scheduled plan for reducing class size, if deemed necessary
3. Professional development for the school's staff and the allocation of any professional development funds in the school budget
4. Enhancement of parental involvement in the life of the school
5. School safety and discipline
6. Establishment of a school environment characterized by tolerance and respect for all groups
7. Extra-curricular activities
8. Means for meeting, within the regular education programs at the school, the diverse learning needs of as many children as possible, including children with special needs currently assigned to separate programs
9. Any further subjects the principal, in consultation with the school council, shall consider appropriate

In addition, in school systems with language minority populations, the professional development component of the council's plan shall address the need for teachers' professional development on second language acquisition and on working with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. The spirit of the law calls for collaboration between the council and the principal. The principal needs to create an environment of openness, collegiality and respect for all participants.

### **When should the annual school improvement plans be submitted, and to whom?**

Plans are submitted annually to the school committee. As reviewing and approving authorities, school committees have the discretion to set their own schedule and timelines for the submission and review of the improvement plans. School committees are strongly encouraged to support the efforts of councils and work collaboratively with them.

**May a school committee approve or disapprove parts of a school improvement plan?**

Yes. Planning is a dynamic and interactive process. The process of review can be an ongoing conversation between the school committee and the school site councils in its school district. Unapproved elements of the plan can be sent back to the sites for further development and can be resubmitted in a revised form. Unnecessary barriers which hinder the process should be avoided.

**May a school committee reject a council's plan even if nothing in it violates current school policy?**

The law gives school committees final authority to approve the individual school plans:

*Each school improvement plan shall be submitted to the school committee for review and approval every year. If said school improvement plan is not reviewed by the school committee within thirty days of said school committee receiving said school improvement plan, the plan shall be deemed to have been approved.*

A clear and published set of school committee expectations regarding individual school plans can reduce the possibility of disapproved plans.

**What happens if there is no regularly scheduled school committee meeting within 30 days of the submission of a school improvement plan?**

If a school committee fails to take action within 30 calendar days, the plan is automatically approved. In order to avoid having to approve an unreviewed plan or schedule a special meeting, school committees should specify in advance the date on which plans must be submitted.

**Does the superintendent have to approve the school improvement plan?**

The law is silent regarding the superintendent's role in the building level school improvement plans. A common sense interpretation is that the superintendent may be involved in a prior review and approval of school plans, but he or she does not have to be. Because principals are responsible and report to the superintendent, they may be asked to provide the superintendent with copies of anything they plan to bring before a school committee. In addition, the superintendent may be asked by the committee to do a technical review of the school improvement plans on its behalf.