

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 695

EA 025 138

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 TITLE A Descriptive Study of Eight School Improvement Councils in South Carolina.
 INSTITUTION South Carolina Univ., Columbia. School of Education.
 PUB DATE 92
 NOTE 77p.
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Advisory Committees; Board Administrator Relationship; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Governance; *Organizational Climate; *Participative Decision Making; *Policy Formation

IDENTIFIERS *South Carolina

ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined eight South Carolina school-improvement councils (SICs) that were identified as effective are presented in this report. The sample included SICs from two high schools, two middle schools, and four elementary schools that had indicated in a previous survey that they had basic organizational structures, effective functioning, and a positive impact on the school. The study offers a descriptive analysis of SIC organization, functioning, activities, and accomplishments. Methodology included onsite observation; document analysis; and interviews with the principals, the SIC chairperson, the school's teacher of the year, and two or more council members. Findings indicate much diversity exists among the SICs in regard to organizational structure, council functioning, and school or district-level support. Problems faced by the councils include inadequate information, low parental involvement, lack of time and resources, and inadequate member training in effective problem solving. Finally, the capacity of SICs to work effectively on school improvement appears to be related to their developmental maturity. Ten tables and a copy of the consent form are included. (LMI)

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF EIGHT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT COUNCILS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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School Improvement Council Assistance
College of Education
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina 29208
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EA-005 138

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eight school improvement councils (SICs) in South Carolina were studied through site visits, interviews, and document reviews to provide a descriptive analysis of SIC organization, functioning, activities, and accomplishments. SICs from two high schools, two middle schools, and four elementary schools were selected for the study because each had indicated on a previous research survey (Kijai and Norman, 1990) that they had basic organizational structures (such as bylaws and minutes), and that their council was functioning effectively and having a positive impact on their school. To increase potential differences among the selected SICs, the study included four schools that had consistently won state incentive grant awards for student achievement and four schools that had not yet won incentive awards.

Site visits were scheduled at each school on a day that the SIC was planning to meet. During the site visit, interviews were conducted with the school principal, the SIC chairperson, the school's teacher of the year, and two or more members of the council. Each person was asked to describe the SIC in terms of its purpose, organizational structure, activities, training of members, involvement with school improvement, and accomplishments. During the site visits, all available SIC documents were collected for the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school year and the SIC meeting was observed.

A descriptive analysis revealed that the eight SICs varied in organizational structure, council functioning, and school or district level support. A summary of the study's findings for each of these three areas is provided below:

Organizational Structure

- The total number of council members ranged from 7 to 14, above the minimum required by law;

- Seven of eight SICs elected a chairperson, four SICs elected a vice-chairperson, and seven SICs elected a secretary;
- SICs held from 6 to 10 meetings during the 1990-91 school year;
- SIC nomination and election procedures varied, but did not ensure that all parents, teachers, or students had an opportunity to be nominated for the SIC or to vote in council elections in five of the eight schools;
- Four of eight SICs had current bylaws, five SICs kept minutes of SIC meetings, and six SICs regularly provided meeting agendas to members;

Council Functioning

- SIC members most often stated that the major purposes of the SIC are to act as a liaison between the school and community and to assist with school improvement;
- All SICs participated in organizational activities, training for council activities, and activities associated with the development of the school improvement plan, although their level of participation in formulating recommendations and taking action varied widely;
- Most of the expenses associated with SIC activities (postage, printing, and training) were paid by individual council members, schools, or other school organizations;
- SICs whose schools won state incentive awards participated to varying degrees in deciding the expenditure of those funds;
- While each of the eight SICs believed that they had substantive input to the school improvement report, their input ranged from simply reviewing an already written report to actually writing goals and objectives;

- SIC accomplishments noted by council members and principals ranged from the development of bylaws to substantive school changes such as reducing class size;
- SIC members believe that they have benefited personally through their participation in council activities, have contributed to school improvement, and have gained a greater understanding of the school, school staff, and community;

School and District Level Support

- All of the principals and SIC members acknowledged that the principal's support of the SIC was critical to the potential success of the council, either to enhance its function or to subvert it;
- The principal regularly attended SIC meetings and was an ex-officio member of the SIC at all schools except one;
- A few SICs worked with district personnel and board members, but only half of the principals were able to name their SIC district contact person, and only one SIC chairperson knew that there was a district staff member designated to work with SICs;
- Only three SICs received the required written feedback on their school improvement plans from the local district school board;
- SICs have no sense that their school improvement plans are used at the district level, and they receive little encouragement or support from the district for improvement activities; and
- All principals provided some orientation or training to SIC members using School Improvement Council Assistance (SICA) materials, but many members felt that most of their training was acquired "on the job" or that they had received no special training although it is the responsibility of the board to provide SIC training.

The diversity among the eight SICs was somewhat unexpected because their responses to previous questionnaires had indicated more uniformity in organizational characteristics such as bylaws and minutes. It appears that responses to questionnaires reflect the members' specific knowledge about the SIC and their generally positive view of the purpose of the council within their school. For example, if members are not provided with a copy of their SIC bylaws, they tend to assume that bylaws exist somewhere in the school files rather than concluding that the council lacks bylaws. Similarly, if SIC members regularly attend meetings chaired by the principal and are rarely asked for input, the members tend to assume that this is the accepted level of involvement for the SIC and believe that the council is acting effectively. Conversely, council members who routinely practice consensual decision making with a supportive principal and regularly interact with district and board staff believe that their substantive efforts make them an effective council.

The capacity of councils to work effectively on school improvement issues seems to be related to their developmental maturity. To facilitate assessment of the effectiveness of councils, a continuum of maturational development was proposed. This continuum would include considerations of organizational capacity, council functioning, and school and district level support. Resulting from this study, a council self-assessment instrument is currently under development and being field tested to assess the maturity of councils along a developmental continuum. SICA will use the results of the field test for strategic planning, to design future research, and to develop training materials that will assist SICs in building their capacity to assist in school improvement efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people provided assistance for this study and their help is very much appreciated. The study design was strengthened by the input of Dr. Jimmy Kijai who also helped to select the school sample for the study by using the School Improvement Council Assistance data base. Jim Casteel from the South Carolina State Department of Education provided data and information on the school incentive program. Andrea LoPiccolo carefully reviewed each draft of the study and improved the report with her thoughtful comments. Jill Chappell-Fail produced all of the tables and provided a variety of assistance during the course of the study.

The study could not have been completed without the cooperation of the principals, school improvement council members, and teachers of the year who candidly discussed their councils, sharing both their hopes and their frustrations. This report is dedicated to all of those who provided information for the study, and to all school improvement council members working to increase school effectiveness in South Carolina.

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INTRODUCTION

School improvement councils (SICs) have formally existed in the state of South Carolina since the passage of the Education Finance Act of 1977. This legislation mandated that each school district board of trustees establish an improvement council (formerly known as school advisory councils) in each school within the district by January 1, 1978. Membership of the improvement council consists of the following:

- at least two parents, elected by the parents of the children enrolled in the school;
- at least two teachers, elected by the faculty;
- at least two students in schools with grades nine and above, elected by the students; and
- other representatives of the community and persons selected by the principal provided that elected members comprise at least a two-thirds majority.

General responsibilities of the councils were described in the 1977 legislation and more specifically detailed in the Education Improvement Act of 1984 (and 1985-1990 amendments to the Act):

Each council shall assist in the preparation of the annual school improvement report..., assist with the development and monitoring of school improvement, provide advice on the use of incentive grant awards, and provide assistance as the principal may request as well as carrying out any other duties prescribed by the local school board. (Section 1, Subsection (3) as amended)

SICs are intended to provide opportunities for parents, teachers, students, and community representatives to assist the principal in school improvement activities.

Each school's improvement report must focus on factors that have been found to promote effective school improvement. The South Carolina State Department of Education (SDE) has

identified six indicators to be assessed by schools in their improvement process:

- positive school climate,
- instructional leadership of the principal,
- emphasis on academics,
- frequent monitoring of student progress,
- high expectations related to student achievement, and
- positive home-school relations.

In addition to the indicator data, other data that must be reviewed for the plan include test results for the last 3 years, attendance figures, accreditation rating, and dropout rates (if applicable). The school improvement report is developed from this data and consists of two sections. Section one contains the school improvement plan developed from the needs assessment data and section two includes an annual evaluation of the school's success in meeting the objectives detailed in the plan. A summary of each school's plan is sent to the parents of each student in the school annually.

School improvement plans are submitted to the local board of trustees by the first board meeting in September. The local board of trustees subsequently prepares "a written appraisal of the school improvement report of each school with emphasis on needs, goals, objectives, needed improvements, and plans for the utilization of resources" (S.C. Code of Laws, Section 59-20-60 (4)(a)). The district board of trustees also prepares an annual report for the state which summarizes the data from each school's report and describes training opportunities provided for SIC members by the district during the previous year. The State Board of Education provides additional training and technical assistance for council members through the office of School Improvement Council Assistance (SICA) at the University of South Carolina, College of Education.

The remainder of this section provides a brief summary of previous research on South Carolina SICs and describes the specific purposes of this study. Additional sections describe the methods and results of the study followed by a discussion of the findings.

Previous Research on South Carolina SICs

Several researchers have studied the structure and functioning of SICs in South Carolina during the past 12 years. Sovde (1980) studied councils in 30 districts and concluded that they helped improve the school's educational program, improved communication between the school and community, increased parental involvement, improved school facilities, and positively affected a variety of school practices in areas such as discipline and grading. Hallman and Kessler (1981) discovered that many parents were familiar with the school councils and that the councils had a positive impact on the educational system. Hollingsworth (1986) examined SICs in 17 local districts and reported that councils with the highest levels of functioning had principals who supported the councils and viewed them as an integral part of the school. Wooten (1989) surveyed 133 parent and non-parent SIC members and found that the majority of SIC members judged their council to be effective and believed that their councils were functioning as required by state legislation. Kijai and Norman (1990) found that 70% to 80% of SICs who responded to a survey reported that they had basic organizational structures in place to function effectively, and the majority of councils stated that they complied with mandated membership and SIC responsibilities. In addition, 70% of principals and SIC members who answered the survey reported their belief that the SIC had a positive impact on school programs.

Several of the studies on South Carolina SICs have noted that the councils vary in their level of functioning and described barriers to effective SIC operation. Sovde (1980) identified schools where SICs were nonfunctional or where the first council members had not received training and did not understand their roles and responsibilities. In some cases, the school board

or school administrators were concerned that councils would try to take over the school and consequently were not supportive of the SIC. Sovde also found that some SICs did not have the necessary resources and time to fulfill their function of developing the school improvement report. The Legislative Audit Council (1980) studied the implementation of the Education Finance Act and concluded that there was not enough communication between councils and local or district school administrators, and that the councils had difficulty in understanding school budgets and programs. Hollingsworth (1986) and Kijai and Hollingswothrth (1987) both reported that nonfunctional school councils were not supported by their principals and were not considered to be an important part of the school.

Purpose of the Study

The majority of previous research on school councils in South Carolina has been based on survey questionnaires answered anonymously by local school administrators and SIC members. Responses from surveys provide important information about the functioning of SICs, but cannot provide detailed descriptions about the organization, activities, and accomplishments of the councils. In addition, since survey data is self-reported, survey responses may not be as valid or reliable as observational data. This study was designed as an exploratory effort to comprehensively investigate a small number of SICs through site visits, interviews, and the collection of SIC documents.

To increase the potential differences among the selected SICs, this study examined SICs that had been categorized as "effective" in previous research that had also consistently won state incentive award grants or that had not yet won incentive funds. The study had the following three purposes:

- to provide a descriptive analysis of SIC organization, functioning, activities, and accomplishments;

- to gather information to assist in planning future SIC research; and
- to provide information to direct future training and technical assistance for SICs in South Carolina.

METHOD

Selection of Schools

Schools were selected for the study based on their responses to a previous survey questionnaire (Kijai and Norman, 1990) and data from the SDE's Quality Assessment Office on incentive grant winners. The SIC questionnaire developed by Kijai and Norman included a set of 44 questions describing SIC organization and functioning within the school system. The principal, SIC chairperson, and one SIC member per school were asked to answer each question by marking one of five possible responses (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, or strongly disagree). Scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) were calculated for each respondent, with the maximum score being 220 points. Two hundred and seventy-six principals and 346 SIC chairpersons and other council members answered the questionnaire and mean scores were calculated for each school.

Data on incentive award winners from SDE was used to identify schools that either had won incentive award funds for student achievement five or more times, or had not yet been awarded any incentive funds. Schools were identified for possible inclusion in the study if they were in one of the two incentive groups and if their mean score on the Kijai and Norman survey questionnaire was 200 points or higher indicating effective SIC functioning. From this group of schools, schools were eliminated from the study if all of the respondents from that school did not agree that the SIC was having a positive effect on the school.

This selection process identified five schools (one high school, two middle schools, and two elementary schools) with effective SICs that had been consistent incentive award winners and eight schools (one high school, three middle schools, and four elementary schools) with reported strong SICs that had not yet won incentive funds. One high school, one middle school, and two elementary schools were selected for the study from each of the incentive groups based

on mean survey scores and geographical distribution within South Carolina. The eight schools selected for the study all reportedly had well-organized SICs that were active in the school improvement process and supported by the school principal.

Site Visits

Each principal and district superintendent was sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study and requesting the school's participation. The letter was followed by a telephone call to answer any questions that the principal might have about the study. All of the eight principals agreed to participate in the study.

Site visits were scheduled for a day that the SIC was meeting so that interviews with SIC members could be conducted more conveniently and the SIC meeting observed. During the site visit, the researcher toured each school, spoke with available school staff, and conducted interviews with five of the following persons:

- school principal,
- SIC chairperson,
- SIC parent representative,
- SIC teacher representative,
- SIC student representative (for high schools only),
- SIC community or business representative, or
- teacher of the year.

The SIC members to be interviewed were selected in consultation with the school's principal. When possible, SIC members with at least one year of experience were chosen for interviews. Each person interviewed signed a consent form that described the study and assured confidentiality (see Appendix A).

Each person was asked to describe the SIC in terms of its purpose, organizational

structure, activities, training of members, involvement with school improvement, and accomplishments. In a few cases, all of the interviews could not be conducted during the site visit and were completed by telephone within a week of the site visit. During the site visits, all available SIC documents were collected for the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school years including SIC agendas, minutes, bylaws, newsletters, and school improvement reports. SIC meetings were observed for all schools except Willow, where the date of the SIC meeting during the study period conflicted with a previously scheduled site visit to Pine School.

RESULTS

This section summarizes the results of the site visits, interviews, and document reviews for the eight SICs included in the study. Separate subsections describe the selected schools and interview sample, SIC membership, the purpose of SICs, council organizational structure, and SIC functioning. Additional subsections detail school and district support for SICs, SIC training, problems faced by SICs, and SIC plans for the future.

Description of Selected Schools and Interview Sample

Table 1 presents descriptive information about each of the eight schools included in the study. Data in this table were obtained from the SDE and are based on information submitted in 1990-91 district reports. To assure confidentiality, school names were changed by substituting names of common local trees, and some demographic data were expressed as ranges to conceal possible identifying information. As shown in Table 1, the schools vary in terms of percentage of free and reduced price lunch, average number of years of teacher education, number of students, and whether the school is located in an urban, rural, or mixed urban/rural setting. The schools are not a representative sample of all schools in the state and the possible effects of demographic variables on the functioning of SICs are beyond the scope of this study.

The school staff and SIC members interviewed at each school are identified in Table 2. A total of 38 interviews, lasting from 30 minutes to over 3 hours, were conducted at the eight schools. At each school, the principal, SIC chairperson and teacher of the year were interviewed as well as a student representative at the high schools. Additional SIC members interviewed were selected in consultation with the principal to ensure representation of all groups on the council. For example, if the SIC chair was a parent, a SIC teacher was also interviewed. In cases where the teacher of the year was also a current member of the council, an additional SIC teacher was not interviewed.

TABLE 1

Description of Selected Schools

School	Grades	Number of Students	% Free or Reduced Lunch	Average Teacher Education	Rural, Urban or Mixed
Acacia ^a	K - 5	900	15 - 20	17.3	U
Dogwood ^a	9 - 12	1700	30 - 35	17.2	M
Elm ^a	6 - 8	1100	50 - 55	17.1	M
Magnolia	7 - 12	700	15 - 20	17.1	R
Mimosa	K - 5	500	20 - 25	17.6	U
Oak ^a	K - 6	600	30 - 35	17.2	U
Pine	K - 6	200	40 - 45	17.4	R
Willow	6 - 8	700	40 - 45	17.0	U

^aIncentive winner

TABLE 2
School Staff and SIC Members Interviewed For the Study

School	Principal	Chair	Parent	Teacher	Student	Community Representative	Teacher of the Year
Acacia	X	X (P) ^a	X	X			X
Dogwood	X	X (P)		X	X		X
Elm	X	X (P)	X				X ^c
Magnolia	X	X (P)		X	X	X	X
Mimosa	X	X (T) ^b	X				X
Oak	X	X (P)	X	X			X
Pine	X	X (P)	X				X ^c
Willow	X	X (P)	X	X			X

^aParent

^bTeacher

^cThe teacher of the year was a current SIC member.

SIC Membership

Composition of SICs

SICs may be composed of teachers, parents, students (grade nine and above), school administrative staff, community representatives, or representatives from school organizations. Council members are either elected or appointed, with state legislation requiring that a two-thirds majority of the members be elected. Most councils also include ex-officio members, most commonly the school principal or assistant principal. Table 3 describes the membership composition of the SICs included in this study.

Table 3 shows the number of elected and appointed parents, teachers, students, administrative staff, and community representatives on the SIC at each school. Numbers of ex-officio members and total SIC membership are also presented in this table. All of the schools have more parents than teachers on the SIC, and principals often use SIC appointments to add more parents or teachers to the SIC to increase the representativeness of the council. Three school SICs have appointed community representatives including a retired teacher (Magnolia School), a member of an important community group (Dogwood School), and a business representative (Oak School). Principals are ex-officio members of the SIC at all schools except Elm. At Dogwood School an assistant principal is also an ex-officio member, while at Oak School the ex-officio members include the former SIC chairperson and the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) president.

As can be seen in Table 3, the total number of council members range from 7 at Pine School to 14 at Magnolia School. Oak School has 13 members, Willow School has 10 SIC members, and the other four schools each have 11 members. These total membership figures are higher than previously reported (Kijai and Norman (1990) reported an average of 8.32 SIC members), possibly because ex-officio members were included in the totals. None of the

TABLE 3

Membership Composition of SICs

School	Elected Parents	Appointed Parents	Elected Teachers	Appointed Teachers	Elected Students	Appointed Community Representatives	Appointed Assistant Principals	Ex-Officio Members	Total Number of Members
Acacia	6	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	11
Dogwood	2	2	1	1	2	1	0	2	11
Elm	5	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	11
Magnolia	3	1	3	0	4	1	1	1	14
Mimosa	6	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	11
Oak	3	3	3	0	0	0	1	3	13
Pine	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	7
Willow	3	2	3	1	0	0	0	1	10

principals in the eight study schools typically listed ex-officio members on the SIC membership form sent to the SDE each year, and consequently these members are often not included in membership counts. The higher number of council members in this study also may support Kajai and Norman's finding that more effective SICs had more members.

Experience of SIC Members

Table 4 describes the SIC experience of school principals and council members. Number of years of experience working on SICs, not necessarily at the same school, are listed for principals and SIC chairs. The percentage of total council members in their first year on the SIC are also shown as well as the average number of years of experience on SICs for councils at each school. Six of the principals have worked with SICs in South Carolina for 6 years or longer, while the principals at Oak and Mimosa Schools are relatively new to council involvement. All of the chairpersons have at least 2 years of SIC experience, and the average number of years experience for the individual councils ranges from 1.7 years to 4.1 years. The percentage of SIC members in their first year on the council varies from a low of 14% at Magnolia School to a high of 55% at Mimosa School.

SIC Elections

Parent elections. Parents are nominated and elected to SICs in a variety of ways in the fall or spring of each school year. Oak and Dogwood Schools hold SIC elections in May, while the other six schools in the study have fall elections. At Acacia, Oak, and Pine Schools a nominating ballot is sent home to every parent as part of the school newsletter or by separate letter. Election ballots are sent home in a subsequent newsletter and returned to the schools by individual parents. Current SIC members or members of the administration nominate parents at Dogwood School and the election ballot is distributed in the school newspaper.

The four other schools elect parents at the first PTO meeting in the fall of each school

TABLE 4

SIC Experience of Principals and SIC Members

School	Experience of Principals (Years)	Experience of Chairs (years)	Average Member Experience (years)	% of First Year Members
Acacia	6	4	2.0	45
Dogwood	10	2	2.0	18
Elm	6	2	2.8	27
Magnolia	8	5	4.1	14
Mimosa	3	3	1.7	55
Oak	2	2	2.3	23
Pine	11	3	2.8	29
Willow	10	3	1.8	30

year. The teachers at Mimosa nominate parents who are involved in their classrooms and a nomination ballot is also sent home in the school newsletter. At Willow School, parents may volunteer to be placed on the SIC ballot at registration, and other parents are nominated by the school administration. Members of the PTO executive board at Elm School determine the slate of SIC candidates prior to the first PTO meeting. The designated candidates are nominated at the PTO meeting and nominations are then closed promptly. Magnolia School takes nominations from those in attendance at the PTO meeting immediately prior to the election vote.

Teacher elections. The majority of teachers are elected to the SIC during faculty meetings in all of the schools except Elm. Typically, volunteers are requested and then affirmed by faculty consensus without a formal vote. Sometimes it is difficult to get volunteers, and teachers who have not been on the SIC recently are "elected". All of the teachers at Elm School are appointed by the principal, and the principal at Mimosa School appoints one of the two SIC teacher members.

Student Elections. Magnolia and Dogwood Schools both hold open student elections to fill student positions of the SIC. Since the popular students elected to the SIC through this process often participate in many other school activities, student attendance at SIC meetings tends to be poor. In fact, none of the student representatives were present at Magnolia SIC meetings for five months in the 1990-91 school year. As a consequence, both councils are planning to change the method used to select student representatives. The Magnolia SIC recently voted to have their four student SIC positions filled by the president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer of the Student Council. The Student Council members have agreed to establish the SIC as their top priority over all other school activities. The Dogwood SIC is considering a similar change in their bylaws.

Purpose of SICs

Table 5 shows the responses of principals and SIC members when asked about the major purposes of the SIC at their school. Principals, SIC chairs, and SIC members most often stated that the major purpose of SICs is to function as a liaison between the school and community. They thought that the SIC should gather input from the community and act as a "two-way conduit of understanding" (Acacia School principal). Six principals, three chairs, and six SIC members believed that serving as a communication link was an important purpose of councils.

As can be seen in Table 5 , principals and council members also agreed that school improvement was an important purpose of SICs. School improvement activities include many of the other purposes cited such as assessing school programs, identifying school needs for improvement, setting school goals and objectives to meet the needs identified, and assisting with the writing or review of the school improvement plan. The SIC community representative from Magnolia School provided a description of this process:

SIC can be like yeast in bread; a permeating factor that can through normal operations or investigative procedures find out the needs within the school system and pass those on to those within the council.

After the process of developing a school improvement plan is completed, one principal and three SIC members thought that an important purpose of the council was to support the school administration and staff in meeting improvement goals. One chair noted that sometimes the SIC had to apply pressure to the school administration to meet the stated goals.

Several other purposes were cited as important for SICs. Fostering positive parental involvement in the school was mentioned as a critical focus of SICs by one principal and three SIC members. Similarly, two SIC chairs believed that councils needed to help their schools meet the needs of students and parents. Three principals stated that a major purpose of councils is

TABLE 5

Purpose of SICs

Purpose	Principals	Chairs	SIC Members	Total^a
Liaison between school and community	6	3	6	15
Assist with school improvement	3	2	7	12
Set school goals and objectives	3	3	0	6
Assess school programs and identify needs	1	1	4	6
Support school administration and staff	1	2	1	4
Foster positive parental involvement	1	1	2	4
Act as advisory body to principal	3	0	0	3
Meet needs of students and parents	0	2	0	2
Review improvement plan	1	0	0	1
Pressure administration to meet goals	0	1	0	1
Help principal write plan	0	0	1	1
Improve test scores	0	0	1	1
Follow SIC bylaws	0	0	1	1
Interact with school board	0	0	1	1
Disburse incentive funds	0	0	1	1

^a Some principals and SIC members mentioned more than one purpose.

to act as advisory bodies to the school administration. Other purposes of councils cited by SIC members included improving test scores, following SIC bylaws, interacting with the district school board on the school's behalf, and disbursing incentive funds.

SIC Organizational Structures

SIC Organization and Meetings

Table 6 describes the organization of each SIC, the number of meetings held by each council during the 1990-91 school year, and the percentage of members attending the SIC meeting that was observed during the site visit. All of the SICs, except the council at Mimosa School, elected a chairperson. The "chair" (a teacher) at Mimosa School was designated by the principal and was unaware of his status as chairperson. The SIC chairpersons at Acacia and Pine Schools were elected parents and the chairs at the other four schools were appointed parents. The councils at Dogwood, Oak, Pine, and Willow Schools also elected a vice-chairperson and all of the councils except Mimosa School elected a SIC secretary.

SICs held from 6 to 10 meetings during the 1990-91 school year. The Magnolia School council met 10 times "only because we're required by the district to have 10 meetings" (Magnolia principal). The SIC chairs were observed to actually conduct the council meetings at only four of the schools. At Dogwood, Mimosa, and Pine Schools the principal functioned as SIC chair in council meetings. The principal at Mimosa School said that he "guides" the meetings, and the principal at Pine School leads council meetings at the specific request of the elected chair. Although a meeting was not observed at Willow School, SIC members reported that the chair actually conducted the council meetings.

Attendance at the SIC meetings varied from school to school. Table 6 shows the percentage of members who attended the SIC meeting observed during the site visits to each school. The attendance at the observed meetings ranged from 45% at Mimosa School to 91% at

TABLE 6

SIC Organization and Meeting Attendance

School	Chair	Vice-Chair	Secretary	# of Meetings	% Members in Attendance
Acacia	X		X	7	91
Dogwood	X	X	X	6	82
Elm	X		X	6	70
Magnolia	X		X	10	50
Mimosa	X			7	45
Oak	X	X	X	8	85
Pine	X	X	X	6	86
Willow	X	X	X	6	

Acacia School. These attendance figures were reported to be typical for all councils except Elm School where the chair stated that only two members came to the April meeting in 1991. The chair at Willow School reported that there are usually only one or two members absent at each meeting. The SICs at Magnolia and Mimosa Schools have had problems with attendance throughout the 1990-91 school year. At Magnolia School, student representatives were absent 5 months in a row, the chair was out for 4 months due to illness, and about half of the parent representatives failed to attend each meeting. At Mimosa School, many of the parents' schedules conflicted with meeting times and the appointed business representative did not attend meetings.

At all of the schools, except Elm, the principal regularly attends SIC meetings as an ex-officio member of the council. In fact, most SIC chairs arrange SIC meeting times with the principal to avoid scheduling conflicts. The SIC chair at Elm School said that "sometimes we don't invite the principal to SIC meetings...teachers are less vociferous if the principal is there." A parent on the Elm SIC stated that "sometimes the principal comes at the beginning and then is excused....people feel freer to talk....I didn't think principals were supposed to be at SIC meetings."

SIC Bylaws, Agendas, and Minutes

Table 7 shows the availability of bylaws, agendas, and minutes at each school included in the study. Only half of the schools had current bylaws that were available for review. Dogwood, Oak, Pine, and Willow Schools regularly consult their bylaws and make amendments as necessary. Acacia School was developing bylaws during the 1990-91 school year and Magnolia School tabled plans to revise their 1982-83 bylaws due to other commitments. Members of the Elm SIC thought that bylaws might have existed previously, but no one had seen them recently and they could not be located in school files. Mimosa School had no bylaws, but planned to begin working on a set of bylaws in the coming school year.

TABLE 7
Availability of SIC Bylaws, Agendas, and Minutes at Each School

School	Bylaws	Agenda	Minutes
Acacia		X	X
Dogwood	X	X	X
Elm			
Magnolia		X	
Mimosa		X	
Oak	X	X	X
Pine	X	X	X
Willow	X	a	X

^a Agendas are prepared "sporadically"

As shown in Table 7, the majority of the schools have agendas for SIC meetings. Agendas are prepared by the principal and SIC chairperson at Acacia, Dogwood, Magnolia, and Pine Schools and distributed to council members at the beginning of the SIC meeting. The agenda for the Oak School SIC meeting is usually mailed to members one week prior to the meeting after being written by the principal and SIC chair. The principal at Mimosa School plans the agenda and mails it to SIC members with a reminder about the scheduled meeting. The chairperson at Willow school prepares an agenda "sporadically" and agendas are not available for SIC members at Elm School.

Minutes of SIC meetings were recorded regularly at Acacia, Dogwood, Oak, Pine, and Willow Schools for the 1990-91 school year. All of these schools, except Acacia, also had minutes for SIC meetings in the 1989-90 school year. Magnolia School did not have minutes for the 1990-91 school year because the SIC secretary (a student) failed to attend council meetings and no replacement secretary was designated. Minutes for the previous year's SIC meetings could not be located. Mimosa School kept minutes for the 1989-90 school year, but minutes were not recorded for 1990-91 because the secretary moved and was not replaced. Minutes from only three SIC meetings in the last two years were available from Elm School since minutes were not recorded regularly.

In the five schools that regularly record minutes of SIC meetings, copies of the minutes are distributed to council members by mail at Acacia and Willow Schools, and distributed at the next SIC meeting at Dogwood, Oak, and Pine Schools. All of these schools, except Dogwood, post a copy of the minutes in the teacher's lounge or work room to keep teachers informed of SIC activities. In addition to the posting of SIC minutes, Oak School provides each grade-level teacher chair with a copy of council minutes. The SIC district contact persons for Pine and Willow Schools are also given a copy of council minutes.

SIC Functioning

SIC Activities

Minutes from the five councils that kept records of SIC meetings were examined to provide a description of council activities during the 1990-91 school year. Minutes were kept of the meetings observed during site visits and reviewed to provide additional information of the activities of the councils. It should be noted that the quality and detail of the SIC minutes varied so that the minutes may not reflect a complete record of SIC activities.

Table 8 shows the number of council meetings in which identified activities were conducted or specified topics were discussed at each school. Some types of activities or discussions took place in all councils, while other types reflected concerns of a few SICs or were unique to a particular SIC.

All councils participated in SIC training and organizational activities which included election of officers, establishment of meeting dates, and the development or revision of bylaws. Each SIC received training on council roles and responsibilities from their principal during the first or second meeting of the 1990-91 school year. Additional training opportunities, such as district/regional meetings or the SICA state conference, were also shared with SIC members at Acacia, Oak, and Willow Schools. The Acacia School SIC spent several meetings working on the development of their bylaws, and the Oak School SIC updated and revised their existing bylaws.

All of the SICs also spent council meeting times involved in discussions of various aspects of the school improvement plan. These discussions were on topics such as the needs assessment survey, school goals, the six indicators of effective schools, requirements of the school improvement report, and school test scores. Each council reviewed the previous year's plan and test scores, but other activities associated with development of the new improvement plan varied from council to council. The SIC at Willow School conducted extensive needs assessment

TABLE 8

SIC Activities or Discussion Topics During SIC Meetings at Each School

Activity or Topic of Discussion	Acacia (7) ^a	Dogwood (6)	Oak (7)	Pine (5)	Willow (5)
Organizational	5	1	3	1	1
SIC training	1	1	3	2	2
School improvement plan	5	3	7	3	4
School budget	0	1	0	2	0
Computer technology	2	0	7	0	1
Building improvements/safety	3	2	4	3	0
Incentive funds	3	4	2	0	0
Parental involvement	2	0	5	0	1
Business partnerships	0	0	4	0	1
School program issues	3	3	7	1	2
Curricular issues	4	0	6	0	0
Educational foundation	3	0	0	0	0
Teacher recognition	4	0	0	0	0
Fundraising	0	0	0	2	0
Establishment of PTO	0	0	0	5	0
Recreational facilities	0	0	0	4	0
Staffing	0	0	0	2	0

^a Number of SIC meetings with minutes

activities and participated on teams with school faculty to write goals and objectives outside of council meeting times. Only the SIC at Oak School actually wrote goals and objectives for the plan during meeting times. The other councils' involvement with the new plan consisted of looking over the results of the needs assessment survey and reviewing the plan after it was written by school administrative staff.

The councils at each school spent meeting time in discussions of specific school programs such as language arts, after-school, enrichment, first grade testing and grading, drug/safety, fine arts, and student identification cards. In most cases, the principal raised an issue about a particular program or shared program information with the council. The council responded with comments or suggestions, but only at Oak and Pine Schools did the council make specific recommendations that were supported by the principal and acted on by school administration and faculty. Similarly with discussions of curricular issue at Acacia and Oak Schools, only the Oak SIC formulated recommendations that were accepted and followed by school administration.

Table 8 also shows that some SICs discussed school budgets, computer technology, building improvements, safety concerns, incentive fund expenditures, parental involvement, and business partnerships. As with program and curricular issues, most of the SICs merely discussed the various topics and did not have any substantive input in these areas. At Pine School, the council did make specific recommendations on the school budget priorities that were adopted, and directly affected district policies regarding building improvements at the school. The Oak SIC worked on several of these topics in SIC-sponsored committees and also directly affected school policy or procedures.

Two of the councils worked on issues that were not addressed at other schools. The Acacia School SIC initiated a teacher recognition program and explored the establishment of a school educational foundation. At Pine School, the council worked on re-establishment of a

school PTO, fundraising activities, the upgrading of recreational facilities, and school staffing concerns.

SIC Expenses

SICs incur expenses for postage, printing, photocopying, refreshments, SIC-sponsored programs, and mileage (and possibly registration or housing) for attendance at SIC training conferences. With one exception, all of these expenses are paid by individual SIC members, schools, or other school organizations. At Pine School, the SIC feels fortunate to receive district funds for attendance at the annual SICA state SIC training conference. All other SIC expenses at Pine School are reimbursed from the school budget.

Acacia and Mimosa Schools requested and received funds from the school PTO for SIC-sponsored programs. At Acacia, the PTO provided the SIC with \$150.00 to print special appreciation certificates for all school staff. Mimosa School received \$300.00 from their PTO to fund three special school events to encourage parental and family involvement in the school.

There is a great deal of confusion among principals and SIC members over the issue of SIC expenses. One principal asked if SICs were allowed to have expense money, or if the schools were supposed to pay SIC expenses from their limited budgets. SIC members often paid council expenses themselves to avoid depleting school instructional budgets. The principal of Magnolia School formally requested SIC funds in the school budget, but the request was denied by the district. This particular principal strongly believes that a legislatively mandated organization like the SIC should receive district funds when the district regularly funds non-mandated programs such as band and athletics.

Incentive Awards

One of the legislatively mandated responsibilities of SICs is to provide advice on the use of school incentive grant awards. The SIC chairperson is required to sign the state form listing

incentive fund expenditures to document that the SIC has reviewed and approved the expenditures. All of the SICs in this study whose schools were awarded incentive funds participated in the decision to allocate the funds in differing ways.

Acacia School. At Acacia School, the Program Improvement Committee (a teacher group) developed a "wish list" for the incentive funds through consensus building, and then met with grade-level teacher teams to prioritize the list. The requests for funds were then shared with SIC members who tentatively agreed that a major portion of the funds would be spent on computer technology. A minority of the council members wanted exact specifications on the computer equipment before approving the incentive expenditure, and the PTO board also became involved. The principal said that the problem was "overconnecting; that is, people think they have decisions to make when they don't." The issue of what type of computer equipment to buy continued to hold up SIC approval of the incentive expenditures throughout the 1990-91 school year. The SIC chair never formally signed the state form approving expenditure of the incentive grant, but the incentive funds were provided to the school.

Dogwood School. Departmental chairs attended one of the SIC meetings to present their requests for incentive funds. After the chairs explained their requests, the SIC prioritized the requests and appropriated the incentive funds with the assistance of the principal and other members of the school administration. No details were available on what specific items were purchased with the incentive grant funds.

Elm School. In previous years, the Elm SIC reviewed written recommendations from the faculty on the expenditure of incentive funds and then allocated the funds according to school priorities. No incentive funds were received for 1990-91 and the teacher of the year (also on the SIC) asked: "If there is no money to spend, why should the SIC meet?"

Oak School. The principal at Oak School worked with the teachers to develop lists of

requests for the expenditure of incentive funds and to prioritize the lists. The requests were then shared with council members who made suggestions for additional priorities. The SIC input was shared by the principal with the teachers and final allocation of incentive funds was made by the principal and faculty. The majority of the incentive funds were spent for new computer equipment.

School Improvement Plans

EIA legislation specifies that one of the responsibilities of the SIC is to assist with the needs assessment and preparation of the school improvement report. Each council in this study believed that they had substantive input into the report, but their input ranged from simply reviewing the report to actually writing goals and objectives for school improvement. All of the eight schools administered the state needs assessment survey to their teachers, parents, and students (if applicable) and the SICs were involved in an examination of the results. The councils also reviewed school test scores, attendance figures, and dropout rates (if applicable). In five of the schools (Acacia, Dogwood, Elm, Magnolia, and Pine), the principal and other administrative staff used the SIC comments as input to their writing of the school improvement plan. The plan was then submitted to council members for their review. Council comments were rarely substantive; the Magnolia School principal stated that SIC "rubber stamps 99.9% of it (the plan)."

The SICs at Mimosa, Oak, and Willow Schools were more extensively involved in both the needs assessment activities and the actual writing of the improvement plan. In response to confusion about the meaning of some questions on the state's needs assessment survey, these three councils conducted additional needs assessment activities. The SICs at Oak and Mimosa Schools designed and administered their own parent surveys. The Oak School survey was administered in the spring of 1990, and the Mimosa School survey was administered in the

spring of 1991. Both councils were very enthusiastic about the wealth of information that these surveys provided about school needs for improvement. The SIC chair at Willow School personally conducted needs assessment focus groups for teachers, parents, and students to identify and prioritize school needs for improvement.

After collecting the needs assessment information and reviewing other pertinent school data, the SICs participated in the development of the goals and objectives for the school improvement plan. The Oak School SIC wrote one or more of the goals and objectives at each council meeting throughout the year. The Mimosa SIC met in May and June of 1991 to prioritize school needs for improvement and work on school goals. The Willow School SIC formed six committees of teachers (chaired by SIC members) organized around the six effective schools indicators to evaluate information from the focus groups and to write school goals and objectives. The principals and administrative staff at each of these schools incorporated the council's work into a draft of the school improvement report and submitted the report to the SIC for review.

SIC Accomplishments

Each principal and SIC member was asked to describe what they believed to be the accomplishments of the council for the 1989-90 and 1990-91 school years. The responses were unique to each school and consequently will be described separately by school in the following sections.

Acacia School. The principal could not list specific accomplishments of the SIC. He stated that the SIC has "begun to understand how the school operates and has started to look at needed improvements, but nothing specific has been accomplished." The SIC chair listed three accomplishments: (1) development of bylaws; (2) development of liaison with the PTO; and (3) provision of SIC appreciation certificates to all school staff. A teacher on the SIC believed

that the council had developed cohesiveness and had made progress in investigating an educational foundation for the school. One of the SIC parents stated that "there was no big project in 1989-90 other than spending incentive grant money." She believed that "nothing of significance" was done in 1990-91 except working on the bylaws and reviewing needs assessment survey data.

Dogwood School. When asked about SIC accomplishments, the principal said that there were "not really any yet." The SIC chair was not certain if there were any **major** accomplishments, but believed that the SIC was providing "a better awareness of the school in the community" and working on the appearance of the school building. A SIC teacher thought that the major accomplishments were distributing incentive funds and addressing the issue of poor student attendance. Finally, one of the student SIC members stated that the council had addressed issues of educational equity and helped institute student identification cards.

Elm School. The principal could not enumerate any specific SIC accomplishments, but said that the SIC was working on an educational foundation for the school. The SIC chairperson stated that she did not know about last year, but "this year is a lost cause." One of the SIC teacher representatives said that the council "primarily spent money (incentive funds) this year and last year." In addition, this teacher believed that the council had looked at test scores and worked on individual program needs. A SIC parent thought that the SIC was identifying areas of need through analysis of test data.

Magnolia School. The principal and SIC members all agreed that the major accomplishment of the council for 1990-91 was providing the community with information on the district's building plans and organizing a public forum on the topic. Approximately 150 persons attended the public forum and heard a variety of speakers, including the SIC chair, describe the pros and cons of the proposed district plan. The SIC at Magnolia School had

not been very active before 1990-91 (according to the principal), but the building issue seemed to bring purpose and cohesiveness to the council. The community representative stated that "SIC has been like a magnet; drawing people's attention to certain needs within the system that otherwise they would not know about."

Mimosa School. The principal and SIC members at Mimosa School unanimously agreed on the major accomplishment of the council. In the 1989-90 school year, a volunteer program was established with a coordinator (1990-91 SIC chair) and steering committee who developed guidelines for volunteers and several programs to increase parental involvement in the school. The programs, sponsored by the SIC and funded by the PTO, were held before school and designed to involve grandparents, parents, other female relatives, and other male relatives. As a result of these efforts, volunteer numbers tripled and over 100 adults have participated in each of the SIC programs.

Oak School. There was no single major accomplishment cited by the principal and SIC members at Oak, but all of these persons described very positive accomplishments of the several committees sponsored by the SIC. The principal was pleased that the class size committee had gotten district attention, and specifically mentioned accomplishments of the computer technology, parent communication, and business partnership committees. He also stated that the SIC had been very helpful to him in setting school goals. The SIC chair thought that the committee structure had been very helpful as a liaison between the school and community. Lines of communication had been opened to parents and parental involvement had increased. In addition, the chair believed that it was a major SIC accomplishment for the district school board to appoint a county-wide committee on class size chaired by the Oak SIC member responsible for bringing the issue to the attention of the board. A teacher on the SIC also noted the work on class size as a major accomplishment together with the council's efforts at fostering

business partnerships. A SIC parent representative believed that the council had "gotten off the ground and is working as it should" under the stewardship of the current principal. He cited the development of bylaws, the work of the computer technology committee, and the increase in number of business partners as noteworthy accomplishments.

Pine School. The principal of Pine School stated that the SIC had provided substantial assistance in allocating district funds to school budget categories. In addition, he thought that the school had benefitted from having SIC members work directly with district staff and school board members to achieve important objectives identified by the principal and SIC. Two areas in which SIC members worked with district and school board staff were:

- rebuilding the school gym after damage from hurricane Hugo instead of building a multipurpose room that had been proposed by the district; and
- convincing the district and school board to deed a nearby athletic field to the recreation department so that recreation funds could be used to upgrade the field for use of Pine School students.

The SIC chair agreed that the council's successful work with the district and school board had been a major accomplishment. He also noted that the SIC developed new guidelines and bylaws for the PTO, and ran the Halloween Carnival to raise school funds since there was no current school PTO. Parent and teacher SIC representatives thought that the council's efforts to have the athletic field upgraded were an important accomplishment. The SIC teacher also thought that the council's review of first grade report cards was significant. The SIC parent and teacher also concurred that council activities have led to greater parental involvement and support for the school.

Willow School. The principal at Willow School stated that the SIC is "learning what to do, how to do it, and how to plan." The SIC has caused parents and teachers to examine test

scores, and has opened lines of communication through comprehensive needs assessment activities. The SIC chair said that the council "basically didn't do much except get organized" in 1989-90 following the arrival of their current principal. During the 1990-91 school year, the SIC chair conducted needs assessment focus groups with teachers, parents, and students. This comprehensive needs assessment was perceived by the SIC chair, a SIC parent, and a SIC teacher as a significant accomplishment of the council.

Benefits of SIC Membership

SIC members believe that they have benefited in numerous ways through their participation in council activities. As shown in Table 9, seven SIC members thought that they had gained a better understanding of the school administration and faculty. An equal number of SIC members stated that their work on the council had enabled them to identify specific areas in the school that needed improvement. Three teacher representatives and one SIC chair (also a teacher) believed that their SIC activities helped them to become more aware of parental and community concerns. Three SIC members thought that they had gained a great deal of information about school operations and activities. SIC members also said that they had learned about the analysis of test data, district operations, SIC operations, the expenditure of incentive funds, and the importance of joint parent/teacher involvement in decision making.

Some SIC members also reported a sense of personal accomplishment resulting from their council activities. A parent on the Oak School SIC said that his participation had "been an education for me" and that he felt "like an integral part" of the school. A parent at Pine School stated that "I personally have a sense of accomplishment. We are better every year and SIC is a part of that...I like to think I got more out of it than I put in." Similarly, the chairperson at Pine School said "I learned that if you get involved and care, you do have a say-so."

TABLE 9
Benefits of SIC Membership

Benefits	Chairs	Parents	Teachers	Students	Total ^a
Better understanding of school administration and faculty	1	4	1	1	7
Able to identify needs for school improvement	3	3	0	1	7
More aware of parental and community concerns	1	0	3	0	4
More knowledgeable about school operation and activities	1	1	1	0	3
Better understanding of analysis of test data	1	0	2	0	3
More knowledgeable about district	1	2	0	0	3
More knowledgeable about SIC	0	1	0	1	2
Understand expenditure of incentive funds	1	0	0	0	1
Understand importance of parent/teacher involvement in decision making	0	0	1	0	1

^a Some SIC members listed more than one benefit

School and District Support For SICs

Principal's Support of the SIC

All of the principals and SIC members acknowledged that the principal's support of the SIC was critical to the potential success of the council. The principal at Pine School stated this very directly: "The secret of a good council is the real interest and support a principal gives to it. I could easily make it a useless organization; but since I believe in it I don't." The principal also noted that if SIC members only come to meetings a few times a year, the council would be ineffective. As a principal, he tries to involve SIC members in the daily activities of the school and consults once a week by telephone with the SIC chair and other SIC members to solicit their counsel on various aspects of school functioning. As a result, the SIC members feel that they are a valuable part of the school and that they form a team with the principal in providing for the needs of the students.

The members of the SIC at Oak School also believe that the principal considers the council to be a very important part of the school leadership team. A SIC teacher remarked that the principal is "totally supportive...very open and honest...we can talk in front of him...he may disagree, but he never overrides the SIC. The SIC chair thinks that the principal is very "open and willing for help" and tries to involve as many people as possible in the "ownership" of the school.

The principals at Dogwood, Mimosa, and Willow Schools are relatively new to their schools (less than three years), but the councils view them as very supportive and positive. The SIC chair at Dogwood School said that the council had been "underutilized" in the past, but hoped that the current principal might eventually change that situation. The SIC at Willow School was reorganized following the arrival of the current principal, and the SIC chair stated that the principal believes in the SIC process and is working to put "some life" in the council.

At Mimosa and Magnolia Schools, the majority of council work is done by the principals. The principal at Mimosa basically functions as SIC chairperson and performs many of the SIC-mandated functions. He stated that he had lost many of his active SIC members and was not pleased with the council in the 1990-91 school year. The principal at Magnolia School also felt burdened by SIC responsibilities:

...you're principal, so you do it...I can't get the SIC to have any initiative. I have to call meetings; call the chair; do the agenda; remind everyone. If the secretary doesn't come, they expect me to do the minutes....SIC will get more active or they won't meet. If I have to do it all myself, I won't waste time having meetings.

The chair at Magnolia School perceives the principal's role on the SIC in a different way. While she believes that the principal supports the work of the SIC, she thinks that he sometimes tries to control the SIC meetings and does not give the SIC enough autonomy.

Teacher's Perceptions of the SIC

The 1990-91 teacher of the year in each school was interviewed to explore teachers' perceptions of SICs and council activities. At Elm and Pine Schools, the teacher of the year was also a current SIC member. The teachers of the year at Mimosa, Oak, and Willow Schools had previously served on the SIC.

Each teacher of the year was asked to describe the purpose and accomplishments of the school council. The teachers at Elm, Oak, Pine, and Willow Schools agreed that the major purpose of the SIC was to improve the school. At Acacia, Magnolia, and Mimosa Schools, the teachers viewed the SIC as a liaison between the school and community that increased parental and community involvement in the school. The teacher of the year at Dogwood School stated that the major purpose and accomplishment of the SIC was "to give out incentive money." The Elm School teacher of the year also thought that the SIC's most important accomplishment was

distributing incentive funds. The teachers at Magnolia, Oak, and Pine Schools cited increased parental and community involvement as major SIC accomplishments, while the Willow School teacher of the year thought that the council's needs assessment activities were noteworthy. The teachers at Acacia and Mimosa Schools were not certain what the SIC had done in the 1990-91 school year.

Teachers are generally aware of the SIC's existence and supportive of the council, but only the teachers at Pine and Willow Schools seem to think that they are real partners in SIC activities. All of the teachers at Pine School have been on the council at one time or another and believe that the SIC is an integral part of the school. At Willow School, the extensive needs assessment activities, that involved every teacher, created a sense of shared purpose between the teachers and the SIC. The Willow School teacher of the year stated that "the former SIC, under the old principal, was a farce...now we know what the SIC is trying to do." Teachers at other schools are not as involved with the SIC school improvement process; the teachers of the year at Acacia and Dogwood Schools did not know the names of their current SIC teacher representatives.

SIC's Relationship to the Local School District

Some councils deliberately pursue collaborative relationships with school board members and district administrative staff, while other councils operate without reference to these policy-making groups. Both Oak and Pine School SICs have worked with school board members and district staff on school improvement issues. During the 1990-91 school year, school board members and district staff attended two of the SIC meetings at Pine School at the invitation of the council. The principal and council members regularly attend school board meetings in their districts and made presentations to the board during the 1990-91 school year. The Magnolia School SIC chair, a former area school board member, used her contacts at the district office to

facilitate council activities.

Each school district specifies a SIC contact person to interact with local councils and organize training sessions. Only half of the principals in this study were able to name their district contact person, and only one SIC chair knew the district contact person's name. The other seven SIC chairs and all SIC members, except those at Willow School, were unaware that there was a district staff member working with school councils. The council members at Willow School knew their district contact person because she had presented a highly motivating workshop to the SIC during the 1989-90 school year. The four principals who could not identify their district contact person mentioned that the SIC responsibilities had been passed around in the district office so much that they couldn't keep up with the name of the current contact person.

Local school districts must provide training for SIC members each year and their plans for training are supposed to be described in the annual district school improvement report. Only one SIC included in this study (at Acacia School), had attended district SIC training in the 1990-91 school year or was aware of SIC training provided by the district.

District school boards receive individual school improvement plans each September and are mandated by EIA legislation to provide written feedback on the plans to each school. Mimosa, Oak, and Pine Schools receive written comments on their improvement plans from their school boards, and Dogwood School receives feedback from district staff. The four other schools in the study were not aware of any specific comments from either the school board or the district. The SIC chair at Dogwood School remarked that he "didn't think anyone of the board would take the time to read the report ..." The chair at Magnolia School said that she was present at a school board meeting where "some members were making light of the improvement reports."

There is a widespread belief among council members that "the district doesn't know we are out here" (Magnolia SIC chair) and a desire to be recognized and treated professionally by district and school board staff. The councils in this study have no sense that their school improvement plans are used at the district level and they receive little encouragement or support from the district for improvement activities.

SIC Training

Training Received By SICs

Acacia School. The principal at Acacia School used videotapes on SIC roles and responsibilities provided by SICA as an orientation during the first meeting of the 1990-91 school year. He attended one SICA state conference in the past, but has not attended recent conferences. The principal, SIC parent, and SIC teacher attended a district-sponsored meeting on district goals which included a brief overview of SIC responsibilities. The teacher representative said that she had received no training and that "it was a little difficult to come on (the SIC) without knowing anything." Both the SIC chair and SIC parent attended the SICA state conference in October of 1990.

Dogwood School. The principal at Dogwood School also used SICA videotapes as an orientation for council members. He attended a SICA state conference in the past and hosted a SICA regional training session on school improvement planning at his school. The SIC chair attended the regional training, but said that "generally you don't know enough to do much." Both the teacher and student representatives stated that they had not received any special training for SIC members.

Elm School. SIC members at Elm School are given an orientation to council responsibilities by the principal during the first SIC meeting of the year. The principal said that she had attended all of the available training sessions, but did not specify type of training or

location. She does not believe that the training is worthwhile, and makes it "optional" for Elm SIC members. The SIC chair attended one regional training session sponsored by SICA and the SIC parent went to part of one regional session where Elm School made a presentation. The teacher representative read SICA brochures on SICs and thought that she had enough training because "we're doing all we think we need to do (i.e. spending incentive money)."

Magnolia School. The principal provides an orientation for SIC members and has attended SICA conferences in the past. She also has participated in SICA regional workshops. The SIC chair also has attended SICA conferences in the past, but has not received recent training. The chair stated that she "knows basically (about SIC), but barely knows basics" and that "SIC training should be mandated by the state" for all council members. She also noted that it would raise SIC morale if the district paid expenses for training or sponsored SIC training. The Magnolia teacher representative attended training sessions in the past, but none during the past two years.

Mimosa School. SIC members received an orientation to council roles from the principal and viewed the SICA videotapes. The principal attended the SICA state conference in October of 1990 and two regional SICA-sponsored training sessions. The SIC chair received "no real training" and the SIC parent attended a regional SICA workshop in January of 1991.

Oak School. The principal and SIC chair at Oak School jointly provide training for council members using SICA videotapes and other SICA materials. The chair stated that "we're way beyond basic training." The principal and chair attended the SICA state conference in October of 1990 and the chairperson also attended SICA regional workshops. The SIC teacher received "on the job training" and the SIC parent said that he received his training through SICA videotapes and SICA written materials. The Elm SIC also arranged a SICA workshop on interpretation of needs assessment surveys and test scores at their school during the 1989-90

school year.

Pine School. SICA videotapes are also used at Pine School to provide training for council members. The principal has attended SICA state conferences and regional workshops in the past, but not recently. The SIC chair has not attended training sessions because his work schedule conflicts with the scheduled times of the sessions. The SIC parent and teacher representatives attended a regional SICA workshop, and the SIC teacher also attended a SICA state conference "a few years ago."

Willow School. The principal at Willow School uses a variety of SICA written materials and videotapes to train SIC members. The principal has attended SICA state conferences and also arranged for the district SIC contact person to conduct a SIC workshop at the school during the 1989-90 school year. The SIC chair attended the SICA state conference in October of 1990 and the SIC parent member attended a regional SICA workshop. All of the SIC members noted that the training provided by the district contact person was very worthwhile and motivating.

Future Training Needs

Table 10 details the topics mentioned by principals and SIC members as needs for future training. The numbers in the columns indicate how many persons at each school mentioned the specific topics. Totals are also shown for each topic across all eight schools.

As can be seen in Table 10, principals and SIC members most frequently cited a need for additional training on the interpretation of test scores such as the Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP) and the Stanford Achievement Test. Several SIC members mentioned that they are confused about the meaning of the different test scores and their appropriate uses. One principal stated that the SIC "should know what it (test score printout) means without me telling them; SIC shouldn't trust me to do it."

Five principals or SIC members noted that their councils needed training on effective

TABLE 10

Future Training Needs Identified by Principals and SIC Members at Each School

Topic of Training Needed	Acadia	Dogwood	Elm	Magnolia	Mimosa	Oak	Pine	Willow	Totals ^a
Interpretation of test scores	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	6
Effective improvement strategies/networking	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	2	5
SIC roles and responsibilities	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	5
Appropriate SIC involvement	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Parental involvement	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	4
Collaborative decision making	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Fostering positive public relations	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
Conduct and interpretation of needs assessment	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Leadership training for chairs	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Development of bylaws	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Obtaining school data/information	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fostering business involvement	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1

^aSome principals and SIC members mentioned more than one future training need.

school improvement strategies. These councils are eager to learn about the successes that have been achieved by other SICs across the state. They believe that many schools share common concerns and would like to receive information on specific school improvement strategies that have been used by other SICs to address these concerns. The need for SICs to network within districts and across the state to share information and strategies was specifically mentioned by two SICs. As the principal at Willow School explained: "SICs have tunnel vision because they are focused on one school. We need to know more about other schools to see how we compare."

Several SIC members and principals mentioned that their council needed training on SIC roles and responsibilities as well as information on appropriate SIC involvement. Some SIC members did not think that they understood what they should be doing as council members, or what the council as a whole should be addressing. One SIC member at Dogwood School said that he didn't know "where the realm of SIC stops and starts" or "what issues are okay to address, or not okay."

Many additional topics were cited as needs for future training. Parental involvement training was requested by four persons since many SICs are concerned about increasing the involvement of parents in their schools. Collaborative decision making was requested at Acacia School and two schools wanted assistance with methods to foster positive public relations within the school community. Two SICs also mentioned that they needed help in conducting needs assessment activities and in interpreting the resulting data.

It should be noted that many SIC members perceived no need for future training. The majority of these members were so uncertain of their role on the SIC and of the council's purpose that they did not have any idea what types of training might be useful or needed. Some SIC members thought that they already had the skills necessary to be effective members of the council. The chair at Mimosa School had not participated in SIC training and did not feel

the need for future training because "as an educator I feel I have enough training." Similarly, the Elm School chairperson already "knows what needs to be done" without any additional training. A teacher on the Elm SIC stated "we are doing all we need to do, but if SIC is more than spending money (i.e. incentive awards), then we need training."

Problems Faced By SICs

Principals and SIC members were very open in discussing some of the problems faced by their councils and their attempts to deal with these problems. Several council members cited lack of both general knowledge and specific information about the district and school as a major problem. The SIC chair at Dogwood School explained that the SIC's "biggest weakness is that we are not well enough informed; if you are not too well informed, then you are dependent on what the school tells you." A parent on the Elm SIC said that "we don't have enough information...we're just a vehicle to disperse money (incentive funds) rather than working to improve the school." Several SIC members mentioned that as soon as they believed that they had enough information to be effective council members, their term of office was finished.

Sometimes information received by the SIC was questioned by council members and prompted further SIC investigation. For example, the Dogwood SIC decided to examine appropriate uses of federal Chapter 2 funds because the council needed funds for instructional materials and had been told by the school and district that Chapter 2 funds could only be used for library materials. The council researched the issue and discovered that Chapter 2 funds could be used for instructional materials. The SIC chair wrote a note to the district asking that the school's Chapter 2 funds be used for instructional materials, but did not follow up on the request.

Other councils frequently follow up on specific requests at both the district and state level in attempting to solve a problem encountered by the SIC. Pine and Magnolia schools believe

that their schools do not receive needed monetary resources and that resources are not equitably distributed across the district. To meet this perceived problem, council members regularly consult with district or SDE staff, attend district board meetings, invite district or board staff to SIC meetings, and schedule public meetings as necessary to focus attention on their particular school needs. The SIC chair at Magnolia believes that this type of activity is necessary because "we have to make sure that the students have what they need." Similarly, the principal and chair at Oak School frequently work with local district, university, and school board staff to solve problems or needs identified by the council. A SIC teacher at Oak School stated: "If SIC believes in something, they go for it. This is not a silent group." The Oak School principal, commenting on the council's determination to pursue solutions, said that "we don't take no for an answer...we don't break rules, but we work for the best for the kids."

Another obstacle to effective SIC functioning cited by council members and principals at Elm, Magnolia, Mimosa, and Pine Schools concerned parental involvement. Some schools have difficulty enlisting the participation of parents in SIC activities or in school activities and seem unable to improve this situation. Several of the councils have parents who regularly fail to attend SIC meetings, but these parents are not replaced on the council. Consequently, the council does not have enough committed members to fulfil its obligations.

Lack of resources and time were also mentioned as problems for council members. The chair at Willow School said that many of the needs identified by the SIC required additional monetary resources, but the district was not responsive to the school and council requests. Members of the councils at Acacia and Elm Schools thought that there were too few SIC meetings and not enough time to allow substantive accomplishments by the SIC.

A final issue raised by the principal and council members at Acacia School concerned the lack of training for SIC members in effective problem-solving. As one parent stated: "sometimes

things come up and if there's a good bit of argument, it fizzles out...teachers see a lot of what is brought up as more work and we don't know how to resolve it." The same parent noted that many parents were afraid to "push things" for fear that their children's experience at school would be affected. Many on the council were frustrated by the frequent conflict between the school staff and parents over particular issues and lacked strategies to work through the disagreements.

SIC Plans For The Future

Principals and SIC members were asked to describe the plans that they had for their council in the future both in terms of the development of the council and specific issues they wanted the SIC to address. Their responses are presented individually by school in the following sections.

Acacia School. Both the principal and the SIC chair at Acacia School want the SIC to assume an important role in fostering positive public relations for the school. The principal stated that SIC should be "involved in being a positive two-way conduit of information for interpreting the school to the community.... Currently SIC operates as a one-way conduit", only dealing with "negative" comments from the community. A SIC teacher thought that the council should meet directly with teaching staff to hear their concerns and increase the involvement of teachers in the school improvement process.

Dogwood School. The SIC chair would like the council to become directly involved with needs assessment activities to more effectively direct the activities of the council. He wants to develop more comprehensive survey instruments for community use so that the needs of all community groups could be addressed. The principal and other SIC members could not specify any future directions for the council. A SIC teacher stated "I don't really know what issues can be addressed by the SIC."

Elm School. The principal wants the SIC "to be more visionary; they are now practical, down to earth, and busy with their own lives." She believes that the SIC should plan more than three years in advance and not be so constrained by practical considerations. The SIC chair would like the SIC to become politically active by getting the "political contacts necessary to enhance school funding." A SIC parent hoped that the SIC could have input into curriculum planning, but thought that might be perceived as interference by school staff. Teacher morale was targeted as a need for future SIC involvement by a teacher on the SIC.

Magnolia School. The principal and SIC members agreed that the major issue for the council would continue to be monitoring of the district's building plans. The principal wants the SIC to become more involved in school and district policies in all areas affecting the students' education. A SIC teacher also thought that the council should have more input into school policies as well as district policies.

Mimosa School. The principal and a SIC teacher member believe that the council should be more active in analyzing school programs, monitoring school goals, examining test scores, and suggesting necessary changes to increase student learning. The teacher representative and the SIC chairperson also hoped that the council could continue to sponsor activities to increase parental involvement. A SIC parent stated that the most important future activity for the council to undertake is the development of bylaws.

Oak School. Continuing and expanding the activities of the SIC committees was mentioned by the principal and SIC members as the major work of the council for the future. The SIC chair also wants to identify strategies to increase teacher involvement with the SIC so that they will "feel ownership of the council." A SIC teacher did not note specific future activities for the council, but stated that "as things come up, we will tackle them."

Pine School. The principal and SIC chair believe that the council will be able to handle

any issue facing Pine School in the future. The principal stated that the "SIC is very flexible; as needs arise they will be addressed." Similarly, the SIC chair said that the council will "do what needs to be done" in the future. Other SIC members mentioned that they would like the council to help increase parental involvement by working to re-establish a PTO at Pine School.

Willow School. Having completed a comprehensive needs assessment in the 1990-91 school year, the principal and SIC members concur that their major activity in the future will be monitoring the school goals and objectives developed from the assessment activities. As one SIC parent stated: "We want to make sure we get results from the plan." In addition, the principal would like the SIC to continue the Adopt-A-School program, increase parental involvement, and publish a SIC newsletter for parents and teachers to increase the visibility of the council. The SIC chair wants the council to address the issue of school discipline and to function as a "support group" for the school community.

DISCUSSION

The major purpose of this study was to provide a descriptive analysis of SIC operation, functioning, activities, and accomplishments through site visits, interviews, and the review of SIC documents. The eight SICs included in this study were chosen because each had indicated on a previous survey questionnaire (Kijai and Norman, 1990) that they had basic organizational structures (such as bylaws, agenda, and minutes) and that their council was effective and having a positive impact on their school. The results of the study demonstrate that the SICs at each of these schools vary in organizational structure, functioning, and school and district level support. The diversity among the eight SICs was somewhat unexpected because their responses to the previous questionnaire had indicated more uniformity in functioning and organizational characteristics such as bylaws and minutes.

SIC members' perceptions of their council and its level of functioning seem to reflect the members' specific knowledge about the SIC and their generally positive view of the purpose of the council within their school. For example, if members do not have a copy of their SIC bylaws, they tend to assume that the bylaws exist somewhere in the school files rather than believing that the council lacks bylaws. In addition, SIC members' definition of effectiveness seemed to be based on what they believe (or have been told) that a SIC should be doing. Their perception of their accomplishments and effectiveness is based on that belief. For schools with many new members and few organizational structures in place (such as Acacia), the development of bylaws and learning about school operations may lead to the perception that the SIC is functioning effectively. For other schools with well-defined organizational structures (such as Oak and Pine), the accomplishment of specific program or building goals through collaboration with the local school district fosters a perception of effectiveness. Similarly, SICs that primarily spend meeting times receiving information on school activities from their principal who "chairs" the meetings

(such as Dogwood and Mimosa), believe that they have significant input into the school improvement plan when they actually review the plan after it has been written by school administrative staff. Other SICs at schools such as Oak and Willow think that they have significant input into the plan because they are extensively involved in needs assessment activities and participate in writing the school goals, objectives, and strategies. The perceptions of accomplishment and effectiveness are the same, but the councils' quality of functioning differs significantly.

The capacity of SICs to work effectively on school improvement issues appears to be related to their developmental maturity in the areas of organizational capacity, council functioning, and school and district level support. To facilitate the assessment of council effectiveness, it may be useful to conceptualize the individual capacities of SICs along a continuum of development that includes these dimensions. Each of these dimensions will be described in the following portions of this section.

Organizational capacity of a SIC refers to the existence of organizational structures such as bylaws, agenda, minutes, and procedures that specify how the council should function or provides a record of SIC activities. Issues such as who should be on the council, how elections are to be conducted, what officers and committees are needed, and scheduling of meetings are all included in the concept of organizational capacity. The organizational capacity of the SICs included in this study differs more than would have been expected from their responses to the previous research study. Only four schools (Dogwood, Oak, Pine, and Willow) actually had current bylaws. These same four schools also kept minutes of SIC meetings and provided agendas for their members. The Acacia SIC had agenda and minutes, while Magnolia and Mimosa had agendas but no bylaws or minutes. Elm School had no bylaws, agenda, or minutes.

Other major indicators reflecting the organizational capacity of SICs include the prior SIC

experience of the members, the representativeness of the council, election procedures, and meeting attendance. In six of the eight schools, 70% or more of the council members had served previously on a SIC. At Acacia and Mimosa Schools, only about 50% of the members had prior council experience. While all SICs had both parent and teacher members, only three of the councils (Dogwood, Magnolia, and Mimosa) included business or community representatives. Nomination and election procedures also differed among the eight schools. Only at Acacia, Oak, and Pine Schools did SIC nomination and election procedures ensure that all parents and teachers have an opportunity to be nominated for the SIC or to vote in council elections. Attendance at SIC meetings also varied with 80% or more members attending at all schools except Elm, Magnolia, and Mimosa where attendance ranged from 45% to 70%.

Council functioning during meetings and outside of meeting times also seems to reflect developmental differences among the SICs. Although all councils except Mimosa had an elected chairperson, SIC meetings at Dogwood, Magnolia, and Mimosa Schools were primarily conducted by the principal. The councils at these schools received information on school activities or issues and provided some input to the principal, but were primarily reactive rather than proactive. The SICs at Acacia and Elm Schools also tended to spend most of their meeting time reacting to issues. In addition, these councils' occasionally negative or confrontive group process tended to prevent the SICs from achieving consensus on any topic. There was little indication that these five councils initiated activities or worked on council concerns outside of scheduled SIC meetings. Other SICs, most notably at Pine and Oak Schools, spent meeting times discussing current projects or committee activities and planning future strategies. Specific initiatives were formulated in council meetings, but much of the work of the council was conducted outside of official meeting times either in committees or by individual members.

School and district level support provided to councils also seems to affect the

developmental maturity of SICs and the extent to which the councils are able to function autonomously. At a very basic level, councils need the support of their school principal. The principal may support the council by allowing the SIC chair to direct meetings without interference or by providing school data to the SIC. Above this level of support, the principal may choose to involve the council in consensual decision making on school improvement issues requiring school or district level policy changes. If the principal assumes total control of the council (for example, by scheduling and conducting all meetings), council members are not able to develop the skills necessary to function as an autonomous group. Similarly, the support of teachers for the councils and their active participation in SIC activities strengthens the capacity of an individual SIC to work effectively on school improvement issues. Training opportunities provided by the principal also help SIC members to understand their role in the school improvement process and more effectively participate in council activities.

Councils such as those at Oak and Pine Schools who have support from the school, are further strengthened by establishing collaborative relationships with district staff or local school boards. Some members of the SIC at Magnolia School were also able to interact with district staff due to previously established relationships with district personnel. SICs who are able to work with district staff are often able to address program, curricular, or building improvement issues that directly affect the learning environment of the school. It should be noted that these councils initiated interaction with district staff without being aware that there was a district SIC contact person available to work with them.

The ability of a SIC to work efficiently on school improvement issues seems to come from a sense of efficacy shared by council members. This feeling of efficacy, or ability to achieve results, was communicated when a SIC teacher at Oak School stated that in the future, "as things come up, we will tackle them." Likewise the chair of the Pine School SIC said that the council

will "do what needs to be done" in the future. Both of these councils have several elements in common including: leadership from the principal and chair; operational structures and procedures; information about the school, its programs, and its needs for improvement; training for members on SIC roles and responsibilities; input into the school decision making process; a positive sense of accomplishment about council activities; and recognition within the school as an important part of the school team. All of these elements together foster a sense of efficacy and enable the SIC to believe that they are prepared to effectively handle any issue that may affect their school.

A sense of efficacy is developed by a council over a period of time as the SIC matures and builds capacity in organizational structures, council functioning, and school and district level support. The SICA office will foster the continued development of SICs by disseminating information and providing training on council organization, meeting skills, principal leadership, interpretation of test data, group process, and other topics needed by SICs. As a result of this study, a SIC self-assessment instrument to assess the maturity of SICs along a developmental continuum is under development and being field tested. The instrument will allow individual SICs to identify their location on the continuum and assess their council's needs for additional resources or training to build the capacity of their council. As councils participate in assessing their current level of developmental maturity, SICA will use the results for strategic planning, to design future research, and to develop training materials that will help SICs achieve their potential as partners in school improvement.

APPENDIX A



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

COLUMBIA, S.C. 29208

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

School Council Assistance Project
(803) 777-7658

Consent Form

I agree to participate in a research study sponsored by the School Council Assistance Project under the direction of Diane M. Monrad, Ph.D.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in an exploratory study of effective school improvement councils (SIC) in South Carolina. I have been told that the schools in the study were selected because the school principals and SIC chairpersons or members rated the school SIC as effective on a previous survey sponsored by the School Council Assistance Project. Some of the schools in the study have won state incentive money for improved student achievement and other schools have not yet been awarded incentive funds.

As part of this study, I am willing to be interviewed by Dr. Monrad concerning various aspects of our SIC including council functions, roles, responsibilities, and accomplishments. I understand that Dr. Monrad will observe a SIC meeting and collect copies of our SIC bylaws, agenda, and minutes. I have been informed that all research materials will be confidential and that names of schools or individuals will not be revealed in any publications resulting from this study. I understand that this study will help the School Council Assistance Project design more effective technical assistance and training strategies for SICs across the state and be used to plan future studies of SICs.

I understand the purpose of the study and the methods that will be used. I have had an adequate chance to ask questions and I may ask further questions at any time during the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time.

Date Signature of participant

I have fully explained to _____
the purpose and methods of the study described above and such risks
as are involved in their performance.

Date Signature of research director



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