

Parental guidance recommended

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Who makes the crucial decisions in our schools?

SOUTH Australian school communities are demanding a reform of school governance and want greater autonomy at a local level.

Governing councils are being silenced. Principals are concerned that resources are being distributed for their schools by bureaucrats in city offices. Parents want more say about how their children are educated.

Yet, Australia has fallen well behind the international education sector in granting schools more local authority and autonomy.

A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has shown that Australia has the sixth-lowest percentage of decisions made at school level of 25 countries surveyed.

On average, less than half of all decisions about an Australian school's operation is made by the local school community.

This pales in comparison with England, a country which leads in educational innovation and reform, where schools make 91 per cent of decisions.

There is much confusion about what power lies in each level of educational jurisdiction. The many tiers - including Education Minister, department, school leaders and councils - are often unsure what falls within their control and what responsibilities lie with their counterparts.

The South Australian Association of State School Organisations, the peak body representing governing councils in the state, said often a school's contribution felt "tokenistic" at best with little consideration afforded to them for budgetary or strategic decisions. "We need to see a real commitment from our government for the future of self-governing schools," SAASSO director David Knuckey said.

"Part of the process is empowering school communities rather than this centralised governance system.

The philosophy of the self-governing school is clear; all schools are different so all schools have different needs.

"The parents, members of the local school community and school staff are best placed to both identify these needs and then decide what to do about them," Mr Knuckey said.

The state's Education Act stipulates governing councils have jurisdiction over policies, strategic planning, budget, Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) and canteens.

However, Mr Knuckey said often this control was whittled away by financial or policy decisions made by the Department of Education and Children's Services. He said 90 per cent of a public school's budget was set by DECS, not the school.



“Part of the process is empowering school communities rather than this centralised governance system.”

— SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS DIRECTOR DAVID KNUCKEY

Furthermore, the issue of staff control is an ongoing concern among school leaders who lament being unable to hire specialist teachers and support officers for areas of need. Instead, staff are hired through the Department.

International education consultant and former dean of education at Melbourne University Professor, Brian Caldwell, said South Australia was significantly behind other states and the world in addressing school governance issues.

"Twenty-five years ago South Australia was one of the leaders in

Australia... now SA has virtually stalled," Professor Caldwell said.

As the author of a series of research books, including *The Self-Managing School*, *Creating an Excellent School* (1988) and *The Future of Schools: Lessons from the Reform of Public Education* (1998), Professor Caldwell has examined various education systems in action and agrees that self-governance has many benefits. He said Victoria led the charge nationwide for greater autonomy in schools while South Australia now lagged.

State Education Minister Jay

Weatherill said a review of school governance was necessary and part of a legislative reform program that was currently underway.

"There is a need to both provide greater clarity of the roles of governing councils and principals," Mr Weatherill said.

Two weeks ago schools in the Australian Capital Territory were given greater autonomy in addressing school staffing.

There, the Education Department agreed to adopt reform measures suggested by an independent consulting firm in a review of school-based management.

Western Australia has also agreed to a management revolution with 34 government schools being converted to "independent public schools" which are run by boards and where the principal has the power to hire staff directly without going through the department.

Professor Caldwell said despite various state and territory Education Acts specifying school leaders and governing councils had some control over budget and policy issues, many were caught in a power struggle with state education

departments. "State education departments have been very powerful authorities for well over 100 years," he said.

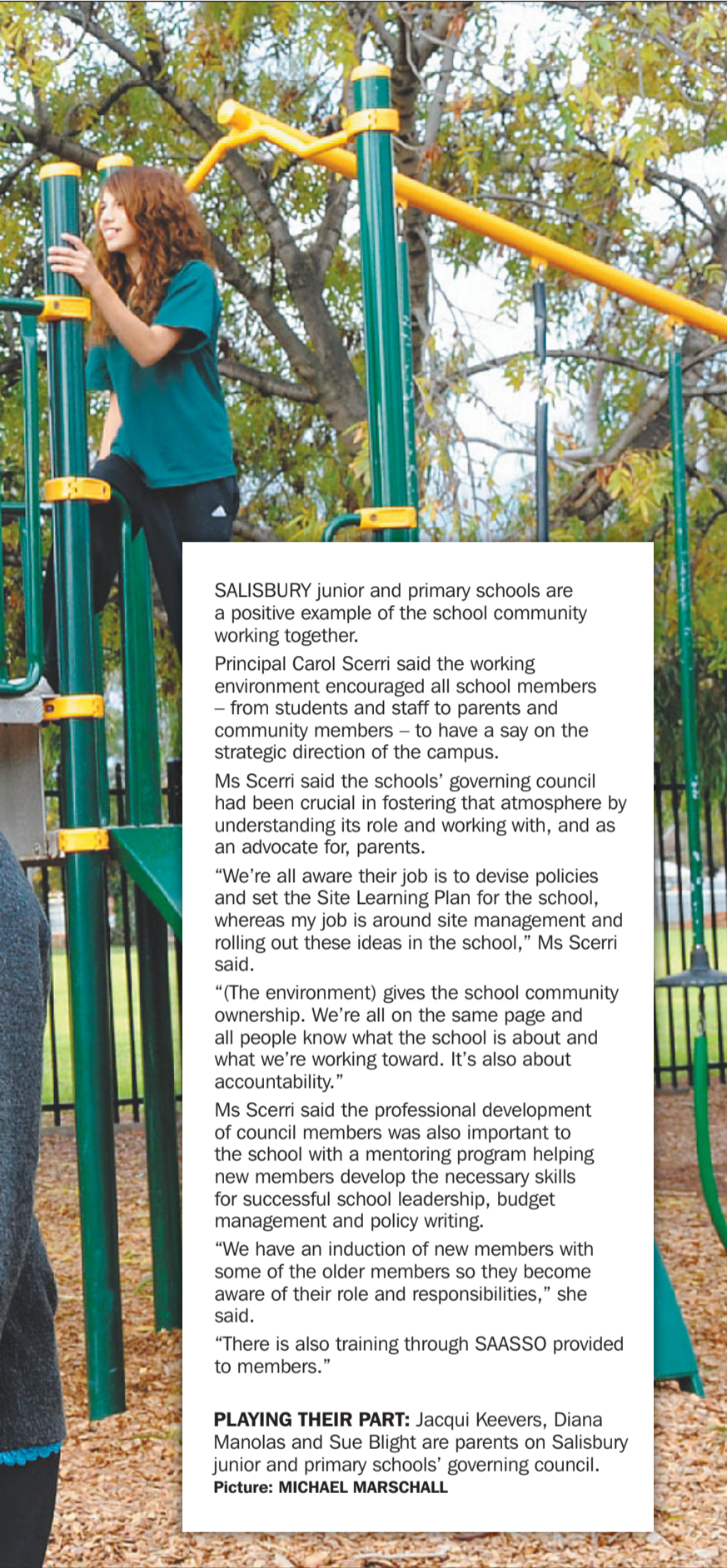
"There is also stronger centralisation in key areas than we've ever had before, especially as we move toward the national curriculum and national testing program."

School education program director for independent research group Grattan Institute, Ben Jensen, said greater local autonomy was proven to have a positive impact on students. However, he warned governments should be wary of what control they give to school communities and how it is then monitored.

"The greatest example is school curriculums; we don't want the framework of a curriculum to deviate too much from what is set out," he said.

"If you increase the independence of school communities, you need to increase accountability arrangements in line with that."

Opposition Education spokesman David Pisoni said school autonomy was a crucial link in improving education in SA.



SALISBURY junior and primary schools are a positive example of the school community working together.

Principal Carol Scerri said the working environment encouraged all school members – from students and staff to parents and community members – to have a say on the strategic direction of the campus.

Ms Scerri said the schools' governing council had been crucial in fostering that atmosphere by understanding its role and working with, and as an advocate for, parents.

"We're all aware their job is to devise policies and set the Site Learning Plan for the school, whereas my job is around site management and rolling out these ideas in the school," Ms Scerri said.

"(The environment) gives the school community ownership. We're all on the same page and all people know what the school is about and what we're working toward. It's also about accountability."

Ms Scerri said the professional development of council members was also important to the school with a mentoring program helping new members develop the necessary skills for successful school leadership, budget management and policy writing.

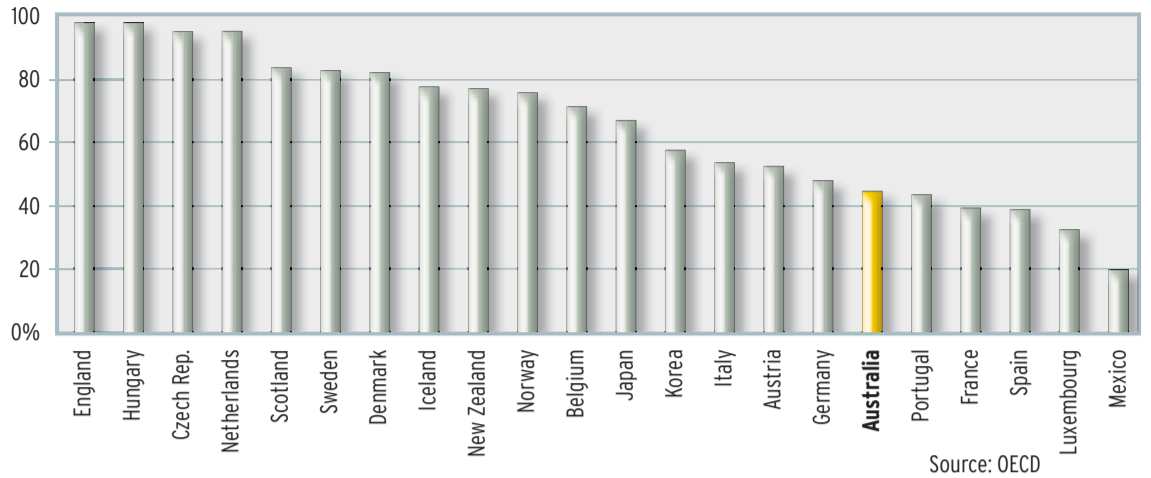
"We have an induction of new members with some of the older members so they become aware of their role and responsibilities," she said.

"There is also training through SAASSO provided to members."

PLAYING THEIR PART: Jacqui Keevers, Diana Manolas and Sue Blight are parents on Salisbury junior and primary schools' governing council.

Picture: MICHAEL MARSCHALL

PERCENTAGE OF DECISIONS MADE AT LOCAL/SCHOOL LEVEL



THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY: CASE STUDY

ROSE PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL FAMILY UNIT

THE RELOCATION of an alternative education unit has caused an "ugly" ongoing feud between parents, the Education Department and school authorities at Rose Park Primary School.

The Reception to Year 7 Family Unit - a "school within a school" set up under Montessori principles, has become the unintentional focus of a heated dispute between parents and education officials.

There has been discontent over shared funding and resources for years, plus conflict over who controls the school which has seen seven different principals at the helm in the past seven years.

Mark Colley was elected president of the governing council in March 2009 in a groundbreaking meeting of 300 school community members. He has endeavoured to fight for the interests of the school since.

However, it has been a bitter battle with DECS (the Department of Education and Children's Services) and the principal all vying for greater authority over the school's resources and strategic direction.

The unit, which has 54 students, has split Rose Park parents because it has a better teacher-student ratio and more room per student than the mainstream primary school. In 2008 principal Brett Darcy attempted to scale down the Family Unit to cover students up to and including Year 5 because of low enrolments, however he was overturned by DECS (Department of Education and Children's Services). Instead, the Department appointed an additional teacher to the unit.

Mr Colley said the conflict was not so much about the location of the unit itself, but about the lack of authority the school community was given to address its own needs.

"This just highlights the issues of school governance. The debate is about the intervention of DECS and the minister in our school management," Mr Colley said.

The principal sought legal advice to determine which authority - the minister, DECS or the governing council - could interfere with staffing decisions.

The governing council also sought advice from DECS legal department about who has responsibility of school management, to which the department legal services manager Don Mackie said the ultimate responsibility laid with the principal.

Meanwhile, the Parkside Primary School community is facing the same conflict over the relocation, with parents fearing the unit is just "political baggage".



Governing Council: A school council that is, under its constitution, jointly responsible with the head teacher of the school for the governance of the school.

ROLE OF THE GOVERNING COUNCIL:

1. Set school policies - this covers a range of areas like SunSmart, homework, school hours, to school uniform.
2. Set the strategic direction of the school - i.e. making your school into the one your community needs; perhaps including whether to be an International School.
3. OSHC & Canteen - In SA, the governing council is the legal operator and employer of a school's OSHC & Canteen.
4. Determine the application of the total financial resources available to the school.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION:

In South Australia, a school's strategic direction is also determined by the Site Learning Plan (SLP). It is a three-year plan to address key issues at your school, as determined by the school community, through the governing council. The SLP can include issues such as behaviour management, student retention, Literacy and Numeracy skills etc.

5. Present operational plans and reports on its operations to the school community and the minister.
6. Principal Selection - At present, principals are appointed by the Education Department, on the recommendation of a four-person Principal Selection Panel.
 1. A District Director (chair)
 2. A representative of the Teacher's Union
 3. A peer principal
 4. A governing council Nominee

Source: Education Act 1972 and SAASSO.

A circular to school communities from the Education Department states in reference to the SLP: "In addition to relevant state-wide priorities and targets, it includes other locally relevant priorities and targets for learning improvement." It is the governing council's responsibility to develop, approve, monitor and report on the Site Learning Plan.

Q Should governing councils have more power? Should members be given more training?

Jay Weatherill
Education Minister

“As part of its legislative reform program over the past two years, the Government has been looking at how best to support school governance,” Mr Weatherill said.



“There is a need to both provide greater clarity of the roles of governing councils and principals, as well as a need to ensure sufficient flexibility to suit local and community circumstances.”

“It is expected that the outcome of the reform will lead to legislative change. “Governing councils can currently access training through SAASSO.”

David Pisoni

Opposition Education spokesman

“The Liberal Party went to the last state election with a ‘Local Control of Local Schools’ policy with the aim of giving greater autonomy to principals and school governing councils to manage their budgets and to hire teachers suitable for their school community needs and to remove underperforming staff,” Mr Pisoni said.



“We envisaged giving school communities the autonomy to offer high performing teachers or those with specialist skills needed by their school incentives/higher salaries to attract them.”