

Hartford Public Schools School Governance Councils

A Promising First Year

A key element of the Hartford Public Schools' Strategic Operating Plan is the creation of School Governance Councils (SGCs), guided by the SGC Policy adopted by the Board of Education (the Board) in May 2009. These councils represent an important effort by the Hartford Public School District (the District) to institutionalize parent and community involvement in the governance of its higher performing, autonomous schools. During this first policy year, Achieve Hartford! conducted an independent evaluation of SGC implementation and performance. Our results are summarized here.

While part I of this report, released in March 2010, addressed the ability of eligible schools to successfully launch SGCs and demonstrate compliance with Board policy through January 2010, this report evaluates the entire first year of SGC implementation, assessing both the ability of SGCs to maintain policy compliance as well as function effectively as a governing body.

Executive Summary

Overall, the implementation and performance of SGCs in Hartford during this first year of the Board's adopted policy can be considered positive. Based on our research, the initial goal of a full launch of SGCs in Year 1 was ambitious, as implementation in other cities operating with similar school-based councils has occurred over several years. While not perfect, compliance and performance results during this first year indicate a strong start. Highlights of Year 1 implementation include the following:

- A total of 28 out of 40 eligible schools operated governance councils in 2009-2010, 27 of which operated under the provisions of the Board's SGC Policy;
- Most SGCs accomplished their primary tasks of finalizing a school compact (24 of 27), approving and submitting a school budget on time (27 of 27), and addressing their school's accountability plan at some level (20 of 27).
- Survey results noted that council members felt generally well-prepared, operated with a high focus on student achievement, and worked well as a team. However, survey results also suggested that members felt minimally empowered on certain budget issues and that greater parent involvement is needed.
- Training for SGCs was provided by Leadership Greater Hartford and proved largely beneficial. More targeted, content specific training is being designed for year 2;
- The average attendance rate for all SGCs over the initial four training sessions was 72%;
- The average attendance rate for all SGCs over their regular meetings increased to 79%;
- Only 20 out of 27 SGCs, or 74%, held the minimum of 6 meetings over Year 1; and
- Only 52% of newly formed SGCs achieved 50% parent membership levels.

SGCs operated in 28 schools this past year and, while some are operating at different levels than others, the majority represent strong decision-making bodies, each made up of parents, school staff, community members and the principal working together to improve their school. Taking into account the expected room for improvement for any initiative this size, the first year of SGC implementation demonstrated a positive first year.

The School Governance Council Policy

Adopted in May 2009, the Hartford Public Schools School Governance Council Policy applies to all “Autonomous Schools as defined by the Board’s Accountability Policy and School Performance Matrix.” To guide the formation and operation of SGCs, the policy stipulates, among other things, the following:

- SGC duties include establishing a process and timeline for (1) the development and approval of the school’s budget, (2) the development and approval of a School Compact, and (3) the analysis of school needs relative to the school accountability plan;
- All members are required to participate in initial and annual training;
- SGC’s shall be comprised of no more than 12 members, with parents comprising 50%;
- The process for parent selection shall be led by the principal in collaboration with the PTO;
- All members are equal partners in decision-making and all decisions must be made by consensus (or 2/3 majority vote where consensus is not achieved); and
- One parent co-chairperson shall be elected by the SGC and, along with the principal, is charged with setting meeting agendas, presiding over meetings, and attending district meetings.

It should be noted that in May 2010, the Connecticut State legislature passed laws requiring that SGCs be formed in certain low performing schools across the state. Such laws, and the structure of the mandated SGCs, were based largely on the policy implemented by in Hartford.

Summary of our Part I Evaluation

Out of 40 eligible schools, 28 schools operated SGCs this past school year, 27 of which operated under the provisions outlined in the Board’s SGC policy. Each newly launched SGC went through a training process facilitated by Leadership Greater Hartford (LGH). The training was conducted in four parts, three of which focused on developing a strong team dynamic within SGCs, and one that focused on content-specific training related to SGC Year I responsibilities. Survey results from our Part I research indicated that the initial trainings were largely beneficial and, in particular, increased members’ understanding of the role of SGCs and their responsibilities as a member. Each council was also paired with an LGH coach who could help ensure the process of getting up and running moved as smoothly as possible. Involvement of coaches ranged from one SGC including the coach as a decision-making member of their council, to another SGC deciding that no help from their coach was needed.

In comparison to three other cities which have created SGCs - Boston, Cincinnati and Chicago - Hartford’s launch of new SGCs at nearly half its schools in Year I represented a meaningful accomplishment. Our research noted that, in Chicago for example, it took over five years for councils to get effectively implemented and operate with consistent authority. The District’s accomplishment is noteworthy, as it helps demonstrate the importance the District has placed in SGCs as part its overall reform plan.

Our Part I evaluation highlighted some suggestions for the improvement of SGC implementation:

1. Modify the SGC Policy to reflect the need for Superintendent discretion to defer formation of SGCs at a particular school based on unique operating circumstances;
 2. Provide increased guidance to principals on how to fill membership openings, especially in the recruitment of parents, since only 14 SGCs (or 55%) reached the required 50% parent membership by January 2010; and
 3. Focus the training of new SGC members more on content-related tasks to better prepare council members to carry out their specific roles and responsibilities.
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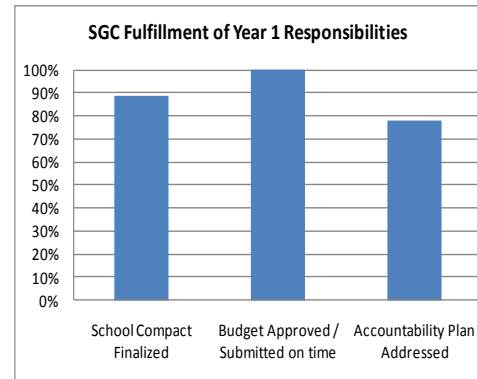
Year I Performance

SGC Performance Relative to Policy Provisions

A key aspect of the Board’s SGC Policy directs SGCs to focus “on the analysis of student achievement, development of improvement plans, allocation of resources and programmatic and operational changes [...]” Consequently, the District charged SGCs with three major Year I responsibilities which included finalizing a school compact, preparing and submitting a school budget, and addressing at some level the school’s Accountability Plan. Aggregate SGC performance in these areas is presented in the graph on the right.

Insert A presents the performance of each SGC against the three main deliverables as well as certain other policy provisions, based on self-reported data by principals. Areas of favorable performance include:

- 24 of 27 SGCs finalized a School Compact;
- 27 of 27 SGCs submitted an approved budget on time;
- 21 of 27 addressed the school accountability plan;
- Five SGCs reported perfect attendance at all meetings, with the average attendance for all SGCs being 79%.



Areas subject to further improvement include:

- Only 52% of required SGCs achieved the 50% parent membership level; and
- Only 72% of required SGCs held the minimum of 6 regular meetings.

SGC Performance and Site Based Management

Both the SGC Policy and the initial training of SGC members reflect an effort by the District to make SGCs in Hartford models of effective “Site Based Management”. Site based management is defined as the delegation of decision-making authority to individual schools in a way that enables shared decision-making among the principal, teachers, parents, community members and students¹. Achieve Hartford! conducted a survey to assess the degree that effective site based management was practiced throughout SGCs in Year I. Specific Results of the survey are displayed in **Insert B**. Research criteria that guided the development of our questions along with survey takeaways are noted below:

Key Element	Criteria for Success	Key Takeaways
Council Preparedness	Councils understand their role in policy making and have received sufficient training to fulfill that role. ²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council members and principals generally agreed that knowledge of needed subject matter was sufficient to fully contribute. • However, council members also expressed the need for more in depth training and time spent understanding the budget.
Real Authority	People at the school site must have “real” authority over resources and policies that affect teaching and learning. ³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council members and principals reported good sharing of authority between parent and principal co-chairs. • Council members and principals felt less empowered to make real change during the budget process because of a lack of budget flexibility. • Collaboration between principals and PTOs in the selection of parent members varied greatly from one SGC to another.
Team Dynamic	Effective councils have an internal dynamic that is cooperative, collaborative, and values the voice of each member. ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council members felt very comfortable sharing their opinions during meetings. • Council members and principals agreed strongly that SGCs functioned well as a team.
Focus on Student Achievement	In order to improve school performance, a council’s attention should be focused towards that end. ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council members and principals reported considering the impact on student achievement in their decisions.

Recommendations and a Look Forward

School Governance Councils operated at 28 schools this past year, and while areas for improvement exist, the vast majority of SGCs represent strong decision-making bodies, each made up of parents, school staff, community members and the principal working together to improve their school. Given the length of time needed for impactful reform initiatives, the launch this past year can be considered a success. Looking forward is now a priority.

The District's focus for next year shifts from solely launching new SGCs to simultaneously providing continued training to those SGCs already up and running. Also of note, many existing SGCs are expected to continue bringing on new members that will necessitate initial training. The District must plan for the expansion of SGCs to the 12 eligible schools not launched this year, as well as others that may become eligible based upon their performance on 2010 state tests. Additionally, because sustaining reform in Hartford is dependent upon maintaining a standard of excellence across all schools, the District must work to ensure that each SGC is functioning at a high level.

As we have noted in this report, there have been a number of positive results to the Year 1 launch. Those results must continue and improve over time. In addition, the following table represents recommendations for improving SGC implementation in Year 2 and beyond, categorized into five important areas. The recommendations stem from the evaluation work completed this year by Achieve Hartford! and from suggestions provided by SGC council members and principals via open-ended survey questions.

Data Tracking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The District has manual and sporadic processes for tracking data relative to key SGC policy provisions. A consistent process for recording attendance, membership makeup and other policy compliance data should be established for each SGC and the aggregation of such data assigned to a district staff person for tracking and analysis. Standard and simple compliance metrics (similar to those reported in Insert A) should be established and regularly reported to allow for consistent SGC evaluation and performance measurement.
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased communication should flow from the SGC to the school community to allow for improved access to SGC activities and discussions. At the school level, publicizing council member make-up, meeting times and locations, and agenda items would be helpful for stakeholders within the school community to engage with SGCs and monitor progress.
Engaging Parents more Consistently	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both quantitative and survey data suggests that many SGCs need to better engage parents. Efforts should be directed towards policy provisions that require SGCs to work with PTOs to select parent members.
Sharing Best Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both quantitative and survey data suggest varying levels of performance among SGCs. While such variance is not unexpected in Year 1, a means for sharing best practices among SGCs should be developed and promoted. Though the utilization of coaches varied widely among SGCs, having a coach was generally well received. Moving forward, best practices for how to utilize a coach should be documented and shared to ensure effective site based management is being practiced within all SGCs.
Additional Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The District should make available more focused budget training to enable maximum participation among SGC members in budget related discussions. In addition to upfront training, ongoing, task-specific training should be made available throughout the year.

Endnotes:

- Reynolds, Larry J. 1997. *Successful Site-Based Management*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- David, Jane L. 1994. "School-Based Decision Making: Kentucky's Test of Decentralization." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 75 (9): 706-12 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20405209>.
- Wohlstetter, Priscilla. 1995. "Getting School-Based Management Right: What Works and what Doesn't." *The Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (1): 22-6 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20405479>.
- Parker, Kirsten, and Kenneth Leithwood. 2000. "School Councils' Influence on School and Classroom Practice." *Peabody Journal of Education* 75 (4, Educational Accountability Effects: An International Perspective): 37-65 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1493052>.
- Wohlstetter, Priscilla, Roxane Smyer, and Susan Albers Mohrman. 1994. "New Boundaries for School-Based Management: The High Involvement Model." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 16 (3): 268-86 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/116440>.

Insert A

Notes:

1. Percent attendance for the SGC at Breakthrough Magnet School was not available.
2. The SGC at Rawson originally approved and submitted a budget on time, though that budget was put back under review.
3. The SGC at the Sports and Medical Sciences Academy maintains membership and meeting structures distinct from what is outlined in the SGC Policy, and therefore is not included in *average* calculations other than "% Attendance."
4. Because of its unique school model, the governance council at MD Fox CommPACT maintains distinct responsibilities and structure relevant to the CommPACT model.

School	# of Members as of June 2010	Reported Attrition	# of Parents	% Parents	# of Meetings	% Attendance	School Compact Finalized	Budget Approved / Submitted on time	Accountability Plan Addressed
1 Adult Education	10	4	n/a	n/a	7	90%	Y	Y	Y
2 Breakthrough Magnet School	8	2	4	50%	5	n/a ¹	n	Y	n
3 Breakthrough II Elementary School	8	0	3	38%	6	100%	Y	Y	Y
4 Bulkeley High School	9	1	3	33%	7	80%	Y	Y	Y
5 Classical Magnet School	6	0	2	33%	10	100%	Y	Y	Y
6 Culinary Arts Academy (at Weaver)	5	0	3	60%	6	100%	Y	Y	Y
7 Global Communications Academy	8	0	4	50%	10	90%	Y	Y	Y
8 Hartford Magnet Middle School	11	2	4	36%	8	100%	Y	Y	Y
9 HPHS Engineering & Green Tech. Academy	6	2	3	50%	3	80%	Y	Y	Y
10 HPHS Law & Government Academy	9	0	5	56%	6	75%	Y	Y	n
11 HPHS Nursing Academy	9	0	3	33%	7	100%	Y	Y	Y
12 High School Inc.	11	0	6	55%	3	75%	Y	Y	n
13 Kennelly School	12	2	5	42%	10	80%	Y	Y	Y
14 Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts	12	0	7	58%	7	75%	Y	Y	Y
15 Latino Studies Academy at Burns	10	6	2	20%	12	90%	n	Y	n
16 Montessori Magnet School	6	0	3	50%	5	95%	n	Y	Y
17 Naylor School	8	1	4	50%	7	90%	Y	Y	n
18 Noah Webster MicroSociety Magnet School	12	0	6	50%	6	55%	Y	Y	Y
19 Parkville Community School	9	3	2	22%	8	85%	Y	Y	Y
20 Pathways to Technology Magnet School	8	0	4	50%	5	87%	Y	Y	Y
21 Rawson School	8	4	3	38%	9	30%	Y	Y ²	Y
22 America's Choice at SAND	6	0	3	50%	4	100%	Y	Y	Y
23 Simpson-Wavery School	8	3	3	38%	7	72%	Y	Y	Y
24 Sports & Medical Sciences Academy ³	20	5	9	45%	21	80%	Y	Y	n
25 University HS of Science and Engineering	8	0	4	50%	6	75%	Y	Y	Y
26 West-Middle Elementary School	13	1	5	38%	5	78%	Y	Y	Y
27 Wish School	7	2	3	43%	8	66%	Y	Y	Y
AVERAGE / TOTAL	9	1.3	4	44%	7	83%	24	27	21
28 CommPACT at MD Fox ⁴	9	n/a	1	11%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Insert B

Survey Results regarding Site Based Management

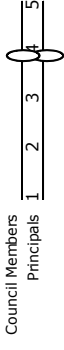
Scale of "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree)

Council Preparedness

During preparation of my school's budget, my knowledge of the subject matter was sufficient enough for me to recommend changes.



During preparation of my school's accountability plan, my knowledge of the subject matter was sufficient enough for me to recommend changes.

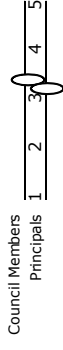


During preparation of my school's school compact, my knowledge of the subject matter was sufficient enough for me to recommend changes.



Real Authority

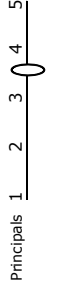
My school's budget had enough flexibility for our SGC to make significant decisions about how to allocate our school's resources.



Our parent co-chair shares authority with the principal and sets meeting agendas.



Council members were selected in consultation with my school's PTO or other parent organization.

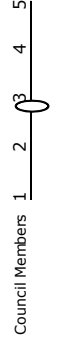


Team Dynamic

I am comfortable with sharing my opinions at council meetings.



The most dominant voice during SGC meetings is the principal.



As a whole, I believe our SGC functions well as a team.



Focus on Student Achievement

My SGC considers how every decision made by the council will impact student achievement.



I am confident that because of actions taken by our SGC, student achievement at our school will improve.



Scale of "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree)