Parental Engagement in Leadership at School: A Function of Community

Jason Heemskerk, B.A. (Hons.)

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Education

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Faculty of Education, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explore the impact on parental engagement with schools when parents have the leadership positions in a school. A review of the literature revealed that parental engagement is considered important by many as a means of improving student achievement. The parental engagement that takes place in most schools is something that schools actively promote through various additional programs, such as administrators visiting parents in the community, or special after school programs that parents may attend. These programs were often spearheaded by one or more individuals from the school, and they were often controlled by the school and parents were asked to opt in. Most of the studies conducted took place in publicly funded schools, but little has been done to understand parental engagement with their children’s education in private schools. Private schools in Ontario provide a unique opportunity to study the choices parents make for their children’s education, and how, once they have made that choice it affects their engagement with the children in the school. Two private Christian schools located in southern Ontario and affiliated with the Canadian Reformed Church Federation, participated in this study. One was an elementary school and the other was a high school. Nine people participated in the interviews, which were between 40 and 65 minutes each. Seven participants were parents, and two were Principals. They were asked questions about parental leadership in the school and the impact it has on parental engagement with their children’s education. Findings show that the parents involved in leadership are highly engaged with the school. They also show the importance belonging to a well-defined community when it comes to running and supporting a parent-run school.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) has historically come under fire for how little it does to support or supervise the private schools throughout the province (Allison, 2015; Office of the Auditor General, 2013; Shapiro, 1986; Shapiro, 1985). Research confirms that the OME has few legislative powers over the independent schools operating in the province. Consequently, this lack of power has led to a lack of oversight and, at times, challenges for the OME to prove that the private schools in the province are educating the children of Ontario well (Office of the Auditor General, 2013).

While the above criticisms may be valid, there may also be an unexpected advantage to allowing private schools to develop and operate largely autonomously. Operating with little official government oversight, for instance, allows many private schools the opportunity to develop as per the direction of those who run them and those who choose to educate their children in them (Allison, 2015). Moreover, it has allowed for innovation to take place that has little or no influence from government bureaucracy, labour unions or government financing (Allison, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2016). Free from these influences – at least directly – private schools in Ontario have either thrived or shut down based on both the quality of the education that they provide and in parents’ interest in having their children attend them (Allison, 2015).

This study provides an opportunity to look at one private school system in particular that is run by the Canadian Reformed Church. It will focus on questions of parental engagement in schools that are established within a Christian religious denomination in Ontario: a school system whose policies, staffing, and curriculum are controlled solely by the parents of the children who attend the school. It will ask the
question: *How does the opportunity to hold governing positions affect parental engagement in schools?* It will explore this issue by reviewing the policies and procedures in place that define the governance of these schools. It will also investigate the role of the Principal as they work with parents and how that affects parental control of curriculum, staffing, and school policy. Further to this, the study will work to build an understanding about how being involved with the governance of a school builds parental engagement and school community’s responsibility for the education provided within it.

It should be noted that the author of this paper is very familiar with the school system being studied. He is a member of the Canadian Reformed Church and he has worked in schools run by parents in the Canadian Reformed Churches in various capacities. In addition to being a teacher in the system for nine years, he was a principal for six. Currently, he holds the position of Coordinator for the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies (LCRSS). The LCRSS is a support organization for Canadian Reformed Schools. This means that it may undertake projects on behalf of member schools, but it does not have any authority to require member schools to utilize the projects it completes. For instance, a school may ask the LCRSS to assist them in drafting a particular policy. Once the policy is drafted, however, the LCRSS has no authority to insist that the member schools utilize it (not even the school that requested the draft). As coordinator, the author of this study works for the LCRSS to setup and monitor these projects.

**Problem Statement**

Ontario has a long history of allowing private schools the privilege of developing inside their own contexts. The Ontario Education Act (1990) states that if an individual or
organization wishes to operate a private school, the Principal of the school needs to file a Notice of Intent with the Ministry of Education (Ontario, 2013b). After that has been filed, anyone wishing to start a private school may do so. Sometime during the first year of operation, an inspector from the Private Schools and International Education Unit will come to visit the school (Ontario, 2013b). During this visit, the Ministry official ensures that the school meets the legal definition for a private school in Ontario. This means that the official checks that the school is, “an institution at which instruction is provided at any time between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. on any school day for five or more pupils who are of or over compulsory school age in any of the subjects of the elementary or secondary school courses of study …” (Ontario Education Act, subsection 1(1), 1990). Once these requirements are confirmed, the Ministry official leaves – and will likely not enter the school again (Office of the Auditor General, 2013). There is some additional oversight in schools which offer the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). This oversight consists of a biyearly visit to make sure that the content and objectives of the courses offered match with OME expectations. Ultimately, what this means is that private schools are left to develop their own systems for governing their own affairs, setting their own curriculum to suit their worldview, hiring their own teachers, and engaging parents who have made a conscious choice to have their children attend that particular school. There is no forced standard or procedure to follow, and thus the structures used vary widely.

The private school industry is competitive, and in Ontario, different governance models have been allowed to develop that are not influenced by government funding ratios or teacher union interests, for instance (Office of the Auditor General, 2013).
Private schools, like their public school counterparts, work to support both community and parental interests (Allison, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2016). Linking to the scholarship, Coleman (1988) defines the school as both an agent of the state and as an agent of the family. He identifies three basic types of school: public school, religious private schools, and independent private schools. Firstly, Coleman (1988) sees the public school as the agent of the state; it is a place where the state directs the education and exists in a society where a weakened traditional family structure is instilled as a norm (Coleman, 1987). The private schools, both the religious and the independent, are conversely considered as agents of the family, thereby having a stronger sense of community. The former is viewed a functional community (a Roman Catholic community) where many families know one another, while the latter is viewed as a value community where families may not know each other, but the share the same values (Coleman, 1998). Given this sense of family, it may be that the simple act of sending one’s children to a private school already instills in parents a greater sense of engagement with the education that is delivered.

Many parents who send their children to private schools are operating on a tight budget (Allison, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2016; Harskamp, 2016). For this reason, innovation in providing a quality education without extravagant cost is important. This innovation is not a controlled experiment; it develops organically because Ontario has one of the least regulated private school sectors in Canada (Office of the Auditor General, 2013). The most important test of effectiveness is one that is part of the free market. For instance, if parents are not satisfied with what is happening in the school, they have other high quality options for education available to them: either they can send their child to the local public school, or they can choose another private school which may serve their
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child’s or family’s needs better. In other words, parents who utilize the private school system have a choice. Since they have a choice, private schools in Ontario provide a unique opportunity to study the choices parents make for their children’s education, and how, once they have made that choice, it affects their engagement with the children in the school. There is little research on parental engagement in private schools, and this study hopes to begin to fill that gap.

Purpose

This study aims to develop the research surrounding parental involvement in education. Much of the current research about parental engagement looks at how Principals and school district leaders can provide different opportunities for parents to become involved in their children’s education (Goodall & Ghent, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Hands, 2013; Harris & Robinson, 2016; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). In these studies, parents are involved by invitation, not by right of place. This study will thus expand the existing body of research by investigating what parental engagement looks like when parents are responsible for all the decisions involved in their child’s education from who to hire to what to teach. It will also expand the research base by exploring the relationship between the parents, Principal, and the supporting community as found in Protestant Christian school societies in Ontario where parents hold all the power in positions of school governance. The goal of this research is to show that if parents are enabled to have an authentic voice in what happens at their child’s school, their engagement with the school and their child’s education will increase.
This aim of this study is to fill the gap in the literature by collecting data from one elementary school and one secondary school, both of which operate with a parental governance model. Towards this end, observations were noted, documents collected, and interviews conducted with parents who were involved in school governance on the school’s Board of Directors and the school’s Education Committee. Literature dealing with the importance of community in schools is also important to this study. Conclusively, this study will work to interpret parental involvement in the school’s governance as an important way of increasing the sense of belonging to a school community that supports one another.

**Research Questions**

To examine parents’ engagement in school governance, the following question guided the research: How does the opportunity to hold governing positions affect parental engagement in private schools? Sub-questions were asked to further clarify the role that social relations play in parent engagement, including:

1. In what ways are policies in parent–run Christian schools interpreted and understood by parents?
2. How does the school Principal navigate parental concerns in situations where the parents have the power to make decisions dealing with curriculum, staffing, and school policy?
3. What is the nature of the interaction between the school and the community that supports the school?
4. What impact does being in a governing position at a school have on a parent’s engagement with their children’s education at the school?
An examination of these issues enabled an in-depth study of the roles parents play in school governance and how school policy, the school Principal, and the surrounding community support that role. They were used to further explore whether having a direct role in school governance increases a parent’s sense of engagement with the school.

The purpose of this review is to examine the state of the current literature surrounding parental engagement in private school education, specifically exploring the situations where parents are leading partners in schools. This literature review will focus on what authentic parental engagement looks like, some of the challenges involved with building parental engagement, the role that a Principal has in encouraging an engaged parental community, and how the broader community impacts parental engagement.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Positive school communities do not just happen; building a positive school community takes work, and the work needs to be done by many different people. Multiple components are required to support each other, much like a well-woven rope. The proceeding literature review will begin by examining what authentic parental engagement looks like, followed by the benefits, challenges, and policies that surround developing such authentic parental engagement and the school Principal’s role in promoting and supporting it.

Authentic Parental Engagement

What does it mean to have parents authentically engaged with a child’s education? What does authenticity look like? When one looks to find authenticity, one may envision a jeweler, looking through a lens at a finely cut stone to assess whether it is a real gem, or just a cleverly cut piece of glass. Or, perhaps if one is buying name-brand electronics online – from China, for instance – one will check for signs that the item is, in fact, ‘the real deal’ rather than an inexpertly mimicked replica produced for pennies in an Asian sweatshop. If the stone or the device, in these two examples, passes muster, we declare them to be ‘authentic.’ While many understand the importance of finding authenticity in gemstones and name-brand electronics, it is legitimate to ask if there is a way to define such authenticity in a more abstract context: when dealing with how parents are engaged in their child’s education. But this begs the question, is doing so important?

Many authors contend that authentic parent engagement and empowerment is important for student achievement, and achieving parental engagement matters in the
operation and the atmosphere of a school (Goodall & Ghent, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Henderson et al., 2007; Howland et al., 2006; LaRocque et al., 2011). In building parental engagement that is authentic, parents need to have a real voice in what happens at the schools their children attend (Henderson et al., 2007). Pushor (2007) also speaks about the authenticity of parental engagement inside education by stressing that there is a difference between parental involvement and parental engagement: parental involvement is defined by the school setting the agenda, inviting parents in on the school’s terms, while engagement is when a school practices real (authentic) parental engagement by operating in a system where parental knowledge and teacher knowledge combine to make educational outcomes. A school that engages parents acts out of a sense of reciprocity, where both families and the school receive benefit. Further, those outcomes do not relate just to children, parents, and the school, but to the broader community. Heinrichs (2018) states that the difference between parental involvement and parental engagement is a matter of invitation and responsibility. Here, parental involvement is defined by the parents being involved in the school as volunteers; for instance, parents are given an opportunity to come to the school to do helpful, but not crucial, work. Parental engagement, however, has parents becoming involved at a different level, where they are now partners with the teacher in their child’s education.

The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) supports the notion that parents need to be partners in their children’s education (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006). Multiple studies and policy documents commissioned by the Ontario government make this clear. Partnerships with families, it is stated, are an essential element to developing education programs for children in their early years and beyond (OME, 2010,
2013a, 2016). In each of these documents, having parents authentically engaged with the school in the education of their children was recognized as being essential to improving student learning, school culture, and school climate.

The importance of parents in the education of children remains important throughout both elementary and secondary school. The OME (2010) works to build the case that,

Parents matter in education. They matter as vital partners who contribute much to the work of our educators, schools, and communities. They matter as parent leaders, parent mentors and models of commitment to excellence in education, and they matter every day as they influence and support their children’s academic achievement. (p. 2)

The OME goes on to state that increasing parental engagement must also be part of policies that are put in place so that parents can play leadership roles in areas like School Councils, Parent Involvement Committees, or Special Education Advisory Committees. Such policies, according to the OME, must acknowledge parental voice by providing a variety of methods by which parents are heard by their educational partners, and likewise, where the educational partners are heard by parents.

Elsewhere, parent engagement in schools has been defined by a school’s, or a school system’s, willingness to mutually determine educational agendas with parents, share power and authority over education with parents, and acknowledge that parents possess knowledge that contributes beneficially to their child’s teaching and learning (Hands, 2013; Henderson et al., 2007; LaRocque et al., 2011). When parents can engage
in these ways, their involvement in their children’s formal education will increase
(Elmore, 1995; Henderson et al., 2007).

If authentic parent engagement and empowerment matters in the operation and the
atmosphere of a school (Goodall & Ghent, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014;
Henderson et al., 2007; Howland et al., 2006; LaRocque et al., 2011), it would be helpful
to understand what that might look like over the long term. Most of the studies available
look at the effect that an experiment or a change in policy had on parental engagement at
a certain point in time. While this is helpful, these studies are less able to answer
questions such as whether parents tire of their involvement and wish to hand authority
over to the experts, or if the school will run well. Some research does explore the long-
term effects of parental involvement and the impact it has on student outcomes (Epstein,
2010; Gonzalez-deHass & Willems, 2003; Heinrichs, 2018; Keyes & Gregg, 2001;
LaRocque et al., 2011; Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2012; Mapp, 2003;
OME, 2012; Pushor, 2017; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). However, this research focuses on
what that engagement might look like over the long term when more parental
engagement was included as a change in a course or an educational fad. It did not,
unfortunately, build an understanding about what parental engagement looks like when a
school system that has parental involvement in school decisions built into its governance
fabric. The research conducted in this paper, then, will add to the growing body of
knowledge about the impact parental involvement has on a student’s experience in
school.
**Benefits of Authentic Parental Engagement**

Research shows that increased parental involvement results in amplified student learning, better attendance rates, and better performance on and completion of homework (Epstein, 2010; Gonzalez-deHass & Willems, 2003; Heinrichs, 2018; Keyes & Gregg, 2001; LaRocque et al., 2011; Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2012; Mapp, 2003; OME, 2012; Pushor, 2017; Pushor & Amendt, 2018).

In a study designed to explore how to increase parental engagement, funded in part by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) found that parents who are involved in leadership positions at a school are more likely to be engaged with their child’s education. The increased engagement was attributed to a sense of both ownership of the school, and empowerment to make a difference in daily operation and culture at the school. Murray, Handyside, Straka, and Arton-Titus (2013) echoed this finding in their research of the empowerment of parents of children with disabilities. Murray et al. (2013) found that as parent empowerment increased, parents of children with disabilities had changed perceptions regarding parent-professional partnerships. Consequently, this change resulted in an increase in relational capital between parents and school professionals. In turn, there was a higher level of confidence on the part of the parents, which led to both an increased level of trust for professionals and a hope that the work being done at a school would benefit their child.

Heinrichs (2018) found that it was possible to build relational capital in her work with Aboriginal parents in northern Alberta in three ways: by visiting the community where the students in the school lived, by inviting parents into the school to have coffee
with the vice-Principal, and by building events into the school year that celebrated Aboriginal culture and that made the parents the teachers of the teachers, so to speak. The benefits listed by Heinrichs (2018) about the impact these activities had included increased relationship ties between the school and the parents, and an increase in appreciation for the valuable knowledge that the community of parents has.

**Provincial Strategies for Enhancing Parent Engagement**

Research points to the fact that increased parental engagement has direct benefits for teaching and learning, and parent involvement increases when they are empowered to make real contributions to the schools which their children belong to. The OME has released a policy document that works to increase these levels by publishing *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* (2010), in which the Ministry outlines ways that schools should be working to engage parents to become active participants in their child’s education.

The OME cites the *Parent Voice in Education Project* report that was commissioned by the OME and released in 2005. In this report, three key areas for action were highlighted: the first was empowering the parent voice in the educational system; the second focuses on schools being inclusive; and the third highlights the importance of recognizing the diversity found in schools (OME, 2005). All three key areas focus on bringing parents into the school equation: the first by giving parents the power to effect change in the school and have their voice heard; and the second and third by giving parents a role in building inclusivity and diversity into the school by providing both a positive atmosphere and an official office in which parents can use the power they have been given. The report suggests that parents be given this power by having the Ministry
of Education set up an ‘Office of Parent Involvement’ which would, “support and oversee (parental involvement policy) as well as existing legislation on school councils” (OME, 2005, p. 28). However, the question remains as to how the suggested key areas for action have been implemented, if at all, in Ontario, and what effect the key actions have had if they were implemented. To answer this question, it would be helpful to look at what is meant by “empowerment,” and to see how it is addressed in the policy developed by Ontario in the years that followed the publication. When looking at the changes implemented in the last 8 years, one can ascertain the commitment in Ontario for authentic parental engagement.

The dictionary defines empowerment as follows: “to give official authority or legal power to” (Miriam-Webster Online, 2016). If someone has the legal power to do something, then they do not need to act through an intermediary: their word is the final say. Consequently, the educational implication would be that empowered parents would be able to directly link their voices to the decisions being made at the local school where they serve. Given that it is the first recommendation from the Parent Voice in Education Project (OME, 2005), it is interesting that the concept of giving official authority and legal power to parents was largely ignored in the policy recommendations that result from that report. Of all the 63 recommendations for policy that are highlighted by the OME (2010), 55 suggest how schools can foster parent engagement through the promotion of inclusivity and diversity, though only 8 recommendations were aimed at giving parents more voice in the decision-making process (i.e. being able to influence decisions at the local school, School Board, and Education Ministry). Of those eight recommendations, there were no opportunities for parents to have the final say in
decisions that pertain to their local school, and there were just as few opportunities for them to have the final say in decisions at the School Board level. Parents were thus given limited opportunity to have a voice (through parent councils), but there was no assurance of this having an impact.

**Challenges for Parental Engagement**

Epstein (2010) points out that parents not being able to impact decisions at their local school is a common problem in school systems. To allow for parents to have a greater impact, schools need to create a caring culture. Epstein (2010) focuses her research on increasing parental involvement in schools which, she writes, will work to create a caring community where parents will collaborate with the local school through six major types of involvement (which will be outlined briefly below). School personnel fostering this collaboration, she goes on to write, will achieve several benefits including allowing schools to tailor their practices to meet the needs, interests, and talents of the local communities. When these programs and changes are purposefully implemented, the result will be that programs recommended for an entire system may look different as they are implemented at each local site. While many districts claim that parental voice is important, however, Epstein (2010) highlights a rhetoric rut, where school personnel express support for partnerships with parents, but lack the skills, knowledge, or processes needed for taking the actions needed to support and develop it.

When parent involvement occurs in an authentic way, Epstein (2010) recognizes that there are three main spheres of influence that impact a child’s education: the home, the school, and the community. Epstein (2010) also points out that in schools that blend these spheres well, a culture of care is built that positively affects the main actor in
education: the student. Given the importance of the culture of care, this culture can be cultivated when schools and districts promote the six types of involvement for students, parents, and teachers. This involvement includes i) the school being aware of parenting needs, ii) the school communicating clearly and respectfully, iii) the school providing opportunities for volunteering, iv) the school understanding pressures related to learning at home, v) the school providing opportunities to collaborate with community partners, and vi) the school providing a voice for parents in making decisions that will impact their children. Epstein (2010) asserts that if the aim of parental engagement is to develop a school into a caring community, work in these six types of interaction needs to be nurtured in the school.

It is especially the involvement with decision-making detailed by Epstein (2010) that holds the primary attention of this paper. Epstein (2010) defines decision-making as, “a process of partnership, of shared views and actions toward shared goals, not just a power struggle between conflicting ideas” (p. 86). To involve parents as leaders, they need to have real representation in the school; schools need to provide opportunities for parent leaders to hear from, and communicate to other families, teachers, and Board members about the needs of the local school (Epstein, 2010). This empowerment should not extend only to some families, but it must be made available to all. Most importantly, this empowerment needs to be built with support for ethnic differences, racial differences, and socioeconomic differences to maximize the number of parents who feel involved with the school.

The success of this leadership strategy has been seen in schools where parents were given a voice that impacted decisions being made. For instance, Mapp (2003)
describes the change in parental engagement at an inner-city school in Boston. The school described in the study underwent a dramatic change in parental involvement, from little to no participation to over 90% of parents being involved with their child’s education. Mapp’s (2003) research demonstrates how this change was due to the fostering of a community where parental involvement was welcomed, honoured, and connected with real issues of leadership in both the community and school. The fostering of community was done purposefully and required the release of authority from the hands of both the district and the school Principal, and the consequent placing of authority into the hands of parents and teachers in their school site councils. Leithwood et al. (2004) also note the importance of a leadership role; they write that if school leaders hope to have parents become more involved in their children’s education, they should be included in leadership decisions that set new directions for a school.

The benefits of this shift in authority are also noted in Gonzalez-deHass and Willems (2003). However, this study also describes challenges that are found in the traditional system which make it difficult to introduce new ways for parents to be involved. One of the challenges is that parents do not have a history of being involved with decisions in schools; more specifically, schooling has become increasingly controlled by a central authority and as a result, parents have been pushed to the peripheries. Since parents have no history in leadership at the school, they then do not understand the benefits that could be attained if they were more involved. Studies have shown that even when parents understand such benefits, the opportunities they have to provide input are scheduled at times that are convenient for school personnel, not for parents (Heinrichs, 2018; LaRoque et al., 2011; Pushor, 2007) There are also challenges
faced due to the unwillingness on the part of current leadership (and teachers) to relinquish the existing structures and controls to include more authentic parental voice in leadership decisions (Leithwood and Menzies, 1998).

For there to be authentic engagement and empowerment, parents thus need to have control over what happens at the schools their children attend. There are, however, challenges for existing school governing structures if they wish to relinquish power and place it in the hands of parents. There are questions that remain unanswered by current research, including: What are the long-term implications for the quality of the education that children receive? Do parents want the power to direct their child’s education? Will they work toward the benefit for all learners? Is that type of model sustainable? The research listed above highlights that authentic parental engagement is an important pillar for student learning – and as such, it would be of benefit to study an established school which sees parents in decision-making capacities to determine if such leadership is viable in the long term.

**Developing Parental Involvement – The Principal’s Role**

In the United States, work has been done to study the impact of decentralizing school control through the implementation of site-based, or school-based, management (SBM). SBM is a reform that works to shift the governance of a school from a central authority – like a province, state, or district – to a local authority like a Principal or school council (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). With the development of SBM, it was conceived that school district that adopted this model as a management strategy would be better able to serve the specific needs of students in individual schools. Being better able
to serve specific needs would mean, in turn, that more relevant and effective teaching would take place, and student achievement would go increase.

Not all studies of schools which adopted SBM found definitive evidence of increased student achievement; however, there was evidence of increased parental involvement (Beck & Murphy, 1998; Elmore, 1995; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). This parental involvement was also considered a key pillar to the increased student achievement that was seen in an SBM school. With his team of researchers, Bryk (2010) studied SBM schools in Chicago, making note of the connection between parental involvement and student achievement. The research, which was conducted over 15 years, showed that when schools improved parental involvement, there were positive achievements made in five key areas, which Bryk (2010) puts forward as pillars, including school leadership, parental involvement, work orientation, safety and order, and curriculum alignment. Bryk’s (2010) research also demonstrated that not a single SBM school improved for the long term when any one of these pillars was lacking:

In many recent discussions about school reform, ideas about parent involvement and school community contexts fade in to the background … Our evidence, however, offers a strong challenge … We have documented that strength across all five essential supports, including parent-school-community ties, is critical for improvement to occur. (p. 28)

Bryk (2010) admits, however, that the parental community engagement pillar is one of the most difficult ones to foster.

When looking at developing parental leadership and relations to build the pillar of community engagement, one of the key factors for succeeding was the attitude of the
school’s Principal toward parental involvement (Beck, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Mapp, 2003). Districts that implemented SBM strategies were only successful when the local school Principal was engaged in the process. The reason for the success was attributed to Principals, as they are position uniquely for building – or breaking – trust relationships between the various actors in a school, and then using that trust as a means of advocating for change (Bryk, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2003). In their study of an SBM school in a low-income area in Los Angeles, Beck and Murphy (1998) also attest to the fact that positive change is the result of the work of the Principal (among other actors, as well). In their research, they found that in the school where parental involvement rose to unprecedented levels, of the key reasons parents gave for their involvement was the Principal abdicating the school administration’s vote on the school council. Here, the Principal displayed trust in parents by allowing them to become decision-makers – a point that was also noted in Bryk (2010) as a pillar for school improvement. In the school described by Beck and Murphy (1998), the school administration would attend school council meetings, and they had a voice in the deliberations that were held when decisions had to be made. However, they did not have a vote; instead, the vote was left up to the seven parents and seven teachers on the council. That the Principal did not have a vote was considered a positive change by parents. The parents were now active, authentically powerful partners in the decision-making process at their child’s school.

In her study of an SBM school in Los Angeles, Mapp (2003) also notes the importance of the role of the Principal in making parents feel that they have authentic empowerment in the governance of the school. When reporting on the reasons parents
wanted to be involved in the teaching and learning of their children, Mapp (2003) found the reasons parents gave mirrored many of Epstein’s (2010) typologies. Parents not only felt that the school was there for their children, they felt that the school was there to help them (Type 1: Parenting). Moreover, parents wanted to be involved in their child’s learning because they wanted their children to do well in school (Type 4: Learning at Home), and they understood from the school that their involvement was valued (Type 2: Communication) and the decisions that they were able to make (Type 5: Decision-Making) helped their children succeed. With a valued say in the running of the school, parents reported feeling welcomed, honoured, and connected – like the best type of family.

Epstein (2010) echoes the value of having a sense of family in a school when she writes about the value of family-like schools and school-like families. These family-like schools accept that students are children with unique needs. As noted above, the Principal plays a role in building an atmosphere that stresses the importance of making each child feel special and welcoming all families into the school – even the difficult ones. School-like families, on the other hand, recognize that children are also students, and parents must work to support them as such. This family-like culture in a school blends with the findings of Mapp’s (2003) study. Epstein (2010) references school culture when she writes about family-like schools, as it is positioned as a culture of acceptance and an invitation to belong. Mapp (2003) writes specifically about the importance of the Principal in building and developing that culture; according to her research, the changed level of parental engagement was all possible due to the commitment, support, and active
involvement of the Principal. In sum, the Principal was the one able to create a school culture where parental voice mattered in an authentic way.

Building both *family-like schools* and *school-like families* are important to parental involvement in the education of their children (Epstein, 2010). However, there is more to building *family-like schools* than simply putting the right policies and procedures in place (Pushor, 2007). When the traditional authorities in the school, meaning the School Board and the Principal, put policies in place which are meant to draw parents in, research has shown that parents still view themselves as outsiders (Heinrich, 2018; Pushor, 2007). Parents may have opportunities to be involved, but being involved does not necessarily mean that they are engaged (Heinrich, 2018; Pushor, 2007, 2017; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). Epstein (2010) writes that parents become more involved when there are *family-like schools*; Pushor (2007) takes it one step further and invents a word for what getting parents involved really looks like in a school: *familycentric*.

What *familycentric* means is that the decision-makers in the school not only involve the families in policy making, event planning, and other experiences children will have in school; it means that the school designs policies, events, and experiences and shapes them around the parents so these designs fit with the parent’s stories. Though written prior to Epstein’s (2010) work, when taken together, Pushor (2007) extends Epstein’s parental sphere to the next level, writing that it is a change from parental involvement to parental engagement. Pushor (2007) exemplifies the difference as follows:

No longer are educators working alone to design and enact policies, procedures, programs, schedules, and routines for the sole benefit of the children of the
community. Instead, educators are entering a community to create with parents a
shared world on the ground of school – a world in which “parent knowledge” and
teacher knowledge both inform decision making. (p. 3)

Pushor (2007) sees the school making decisions for parents without parental
involvement as a form of protective separation for the school as an organization; it is a
separation that keeps the power in the hands of the school and does not give power to the
parents. To get parents engaged with their children’s education, Pushor (2007) goes on to
state that schools must change the narrative and live a story of parent engagement. A
story of parental engagement is a story where parents are involved in decision-making; a
story where parental voice is not limited to a small group, but available to all families. It
is a story where parents can shape the school to fit the local community’s history, reality,
and future needs.

If the current ruling authorities – be they School Boards or government bodies –
allow this authentic voice, the effectiveness of the strategy relies heavily on the ability of
the school Principal to balance the competing interests at play. Also, research shows that
when the Principal’s leadership around increasing parental voice wanes, the effectiveness
of parental voice declines as well (Bryk, 2010). It is yet unknown, however, if this is
always the case, or simply a result of the hierarchical governance structure that most
school systems are surrounded with. What would happen if a Principal’s role was set up
to be one to solely advise parents as they made educational decisions? Would that
increase parental engagement and student achievement? If it is a goal to continually
improve schools, it is important to find out.
Gaps in the Literature

The schools involved in the studies listed above are often seen as experiments, which include parental leadership as a piece of the puzzle that can change. These studies also speak about schools where certain leaders make certain changes that allow parents into the decision-making realm. Even in Pushor’s (2007) model of familycentric parental engagement, any changes that are made to align a school to become more familycentric still rely on power that is held in the hand of an authority ‘higher than the parent’ – even if it is only a Vice-Principal (Heinrich, 2018). What research does not seem to answer is if parents can be even more fully engaged if they are given all the authority to make decisions in a school. What happens when a parent’s ability to be involved in decision-making at the school, for instance, does not rest on the Principal allowing it to happen? Will parental engagement with their children’s education increase?

In southern Ontario, there is a school system that has based its entire governance in the hands of parents. These are schools where the OME, Principals, and teachers are expert advisors, but decisions are made by parents (and grandparents) chosen from the school’s supporting community by the guardians of the students. These schools have a long history, some of them servicing the same community for over 50 years through multiple generations. Throughout them all, the parents of the students attending the schools have held the key decision-making positions in governance, finance, and curriculum. Their involvement is not dependent on the Principal allowing them into this space; they are in these positions by governance design. There is little research that demonstrates both the effectiveness of this style of governance in promoting student
achievement and family engagement, or the long-term benefits and challenges a well-developed culture of parental leadership has to offer school reform initiatives.

**Conceptual Framework**

Epstein (2010) describes how schools should be striving to have a family-like structure. If you belong to a family, there is an expectation of belonging, even when one would perhaps rather not. For example, if one is born into the British royal family, one may not act royal, and one may rebel against the traditions surrounding the royal name – but that does not make one any less a Prince. It also does not change the expectations others will have for you. When Epstein (2010) writes of developing family-like schools and school-like families, she highlights the importance of other people’s expectations, stressing that parents need to get involved with the school to achieve family-like schools, and school leadership needs to work to have families get involved. Once schools are family-like, parents feel welcome. Even when they do not agree, there is a level of comfort with the school that will allow them to state their case and remain part of the family.

When looking at how to either increase or activate parental involvement, many frameworks look to how the school system can do things that provide more opportunities for parents to interact with the school. For instance, the school can increase parental engagement by providing clearly defined roles where parents can be involved (Beck, 1999; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998), providing parents with opportunities to contribute to the teaching and learning (Hands, 2013), or how policies can be changed so that parents can feel more welcome and empowered (Keys & Marion, 2001). While these actions are necessary to build trust and a working relationship, they are difficult to maintain without
a strong actor working for them. Often that actor is the Principal of the school, who manages the relationship between parents, teachers, and those who have administrative authority above the Principal’s office (Goldring, 1993). With this reliance on the one key actor, however, it seems reasonable that gains in parental engagement may be realized only when there is a Principal actor on the school stage who understands that the role that parents play in the school is important – and they are then willing to give them the authority to do so.

When looking at the actors in a school, one could picture how they interact as being akin to a rope; those who play a part in the running of a school should support learning the way a well-fashioned rope supports a heavy load. If one looks carefully at a common twisted yellow rope, one will see that it is made up of many small strands that are twisted into a cord, and then a number of those cords are twisted together. Once together, the combined cords of the rope can support a load that the individual fibers would not. The image recalls Ecclesiastes 4:12, where it is written, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” If one thinks about parents, Principals, teachers, and the school’s community – those who support the work of the school but are not directly involved in its operation – as the individual strands, it is easy to see that they are woven together when the work of the one cannot be done without the support of the other. When these different supporting parties can work together, schools are safer, more stable places to work and learn.

The Principal is often the actor that works to balance the different forces in the school (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Goldring (1993) looks at how increased parental involvement in policy making at schools affected the role of the Principal, noting three
groups that acted on policy in the school: the parents, the Principal, and the School Board. Goldring (1993) states that as parents become more influential in the schools in the study, the Principal’s role shifts to one of middle management. The Principal was suddenly balancing the school between the forces of the central office and the parents. One of ways to explain the relationships Goldring (1993) describes would be to look at the school as if it were a gondola that students use as they move from childhood to adulthood. There are cables holding the gondola to the guide wire that crosses the chasm between the two ‘hoods,’ and each of them exerts their own force on the gondola that is school. One could imagine parents as being one cord, pulling the school in one direction, with central office as another pulling in another direction, and the Principal as a cord attached to a third side, lending support to one side or the other, depending on how the forces at play fit with his or her vision for the school. In addition to these three actors, Keys and Marion (2001) stress the importance of involving the surrounding community in building the social capital needed for parental engagement to be effective. In sum, there are at least four anchor points that schools rely on as they support student learning: the involvement of parents, the direction of the School Board, the influence of the surrounding community, and the Principal.

One way to model this view of school management would be to picture the school as a box filled with students. The students act as a fluid would, filling the space completely and never remaining still. The forces that hold up the school are attached to each corner of the gondola and they all work to keep the school afloat in the air as the students move from childhood to adulthood (see Figure 1). Each actor – including the school Board, parent, Principal, and community – pulls the school toward what it
Figure 1. Individualized support framework for the school
envisions a ‘good student’ who reaches adulthood should look like. When all are lifting equally during the journey, the box is stable and the student’s experience in the school should be one of relaxed competence, with all the powerful forces holding up the school able to operate smoothly together as they hold the school up. However, the moment one of the cords holding the box either increases or relinquishes tension to pursue a goal that is not inline with the other actors, the gondola is no longer stable. The other strands, in turn, experience an increase in strain, the equilibrium of the school shifts, and the fluid – the students – inside the box sloshes. The school becomes unstable, and students suffer the consequences. Alternately, if the vision of one of the actors becomes too strong, the school moves in directions that do not fit with the needs and desires of the others involved. This increased voice can cause instability.

Schools face many challenges in today’s changing world. In Ontario, for instance, the recent decisions regarding school closures are an example where there are competing forces at work. Parents and community partners are pulling against central administrative decisions that appear to be made with little to no consultation or local interaction (Rushowy, 2016). The school, with the students sloshing around inside, is less able to help children move along toward becoming self-sufficient, contributing adults.

There is something to the metaphor from Ecclesiastes 4 that has resonance here: it is one that those whose business it is to build a better education system might be able to learn from. What would happen if instead of having each of the actors pulling directly from their respective anchor point, they first had to engage together in a meaningful way before the forces impacted the school? What if they were to change from being single cords pulling in separate directions to three or four strands that are bound together though
a single, localized vision (see Figure 2)? Even though they still have their different anchor points and forces that they work to exert on the school, would the school be more stable when one of the lines begins to deviate from the others? If the individual agendas of the various actors are tempered by purposeful interaction with the other actors through a localized vision for the school, could this interaction result in better schools? Would the different actors be able to improve communication and engagement, and thus provide better schools?

This is the framework through which this paper will study the impact of parental engagement and leadership. It will look at a school where parents have the operational authority placed firmly in their hands, and where they have a vision for the school that they work toward.

**Importance of the Study**

The freedom that the OME gives to private schools has allowed the population of a religious denomination to develop a governance model for a system of education which is both unique and effective. In many studies, parents are given the opportunity for input when decisions are made at the schools where their children attend (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Flessa, 2010; Gonzalez-deHass & Willems, 2003; Harris & Robinson, 2016; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; OME, 2010). However, in these examples, the authority in the school remains with organizations or actors that are not controlled by the parents. Instead, true authority is firmly in the hands of other actors like the Principal of the school or a central School Board office (Gonzalez-deHass & Willems, 2003). There is no opportunity for parents to affect change on the school except through their
Figure 2. Cooperative and supportive school framework.
ability to act through existing channels of power, be that the Principal (Beck & Murphy, 1998) or government mandated committees with little active authority (OME, 2010). There are instances where parents can affect change in the school using their social capital, but even here, their ability is hampered by the value of that capital with the people in authority (Barton et al., 2004).

This study works to understand how having operational authority in a school affects parent engagement in the school. There has been very little research about this type of parental engagement. Studies have shown the positive impact of parental engagement on student learning (Epstein, 2010; Gonzalez-deHass & Willems, 2003; Heinrichs, 2018; Keyes & Gregg, 2001; LaRocque et al., 2011; Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2012; Mapp, 2003; OME, 2012; Pushor, 2017; Pushor & Amendt, 2018), but the parents involved in these studies were visitors to the system who were invited in by the Principal or a ruling body; the parents were not the owners and operators of the school. The system being investigated in this study, conversely, has a long history of graduating students who go on to be effective members of their local communities (Pennings, Sikkink, Van Pelt, Van Brummelen, & Von Heyking, 2012). Looking at this system will inform further research into parental engagement in education, and it may give insights into areas where parents could be involved in leadership positions at schools, be that in governance and policy setting, curriculum implementation, or teacher supervision. Finally, this study furthers research on the school choices that parents make when they send their children to a non-government school in Ontario (Allison, Hasan, & Van Pelt, 2016), and it furthers the research on why parents choose to send their children
to a private school in that it investigates the community involvement existent at the schools participating in the study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

When looking at the impact of holding school governance roles on levels of parental engagement, a qualitative research methodology lends itself well since the central question revolves around how engaged parents perceive themselves to be. Qualitative methods can be used to obtain more complex detail on thoughts, feelings, and emotions that may be difficult to obtain using quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Moreover, using qualitative methods will also allow the perceptions and experiences of the people interviewed to be better understood in context (Creswell, 2012).

Methodology and Research Design

The method used for this study is a collective case study. Using a case study anchors the research on the sociologically constructed nature of reality as it is experienced by parents in the different schools involved in the study. Not all the variables about how being involved in the governance of a school will affect a parent’s engagement in it are known. This type of rich data only comes from directly asking the people involved. Working with a case study also has the added advantage of attaching the researcher to the project in a positive way, since he or she will have personal experience with the collection of the data (Njie & Asimiran, 2014).

In this study, the experiences of each of the participants were considered as a separate case. Though the participants belong to two different schools, both schools operate under the same governance model, so having the participants speak about their individual experience allowed for a more varied comparison. Using a collective case study allows the research to focus on more than one case, providing an opportunity to
investigate the general condition of the schools involved from more than one perspective, thereby adding credibility to the findings of the research (Creswell, 2014).

**Sample and Population & Site and Participant Selection**

The sample selection for this study was non-random, purposeful, and small, which is often the case with qualitative studies because research has shown that this is the best way to understand the central tenant under study (Creswell, 2014). Since there is a lack of information available about parental involvement in school governance and the impact it has on parental engagement in schools, the sample involved two schools where this type of governance is practiced.

I approached schools to request participation in this study based on multiple criteria. The main criteria for school selection was the presence of a governance model that places all final educational decisions of the school in the hands of the parents, as opposed to a central School Board that controls the decisions at multiple schools, or schools where the Principal has the final say. Schools that are affiliated with the Canadian Reformed Churches fit this sample since there are multiple schools inside that church community that are parent-run, with only a loose, advisory super organization that they work under, called the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies – an organization in which I am involved, as mentioned earlier. Further selection criteria involved choosing schools that had, at minimum, a ten-year history of operation. This selection process allows for credibility in a parental model of governance because it is not new or temporary, and it has been put into practice and modified as needed over time.

Once the requests were sent out, one Canadian Reformed elementary school and one Canadian Reformed secondary school were chosen to participate in the study. These
two were chosen because while the same model may govern them, it seemed likely that different influences played a part in a parent’s sense of control in an elementary school as opposed to a secondary school. The difference between the two schools was especially true in relation to curriculum. For instance, while there is little to no oversight in Ontario on the curriculum taught at private elementary schools, secondary schools that offer the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) are required to teach government mandated courses. Following the government courses means that secondary schools need to adhere to the both content and timing requirements of the OSSD courses, as well as assessment guidelines mandated by the OME. Parents who have children in the secondary school therefore have less control over their child’s education than their elementary school counterparts – even though they have the same governance model.

**The School System Involved**

The schools in this study service parents and students who belong the Canadian Reformed Church Federation. To better understand the schools involved with this research, it is worth understanding a little about the history of the Canadian Reformed school system. Understanding the history will help the reader understand the rationale that the founding parents of the school had for investing the time, energy, and money into it.

The Canadian Reformed Church Federation has agreed to follow a standard of federative unity that is outlined in a Church Order. In addition to articles that deal with church polity, rules for church assemblies, and other matters that relate to the how the church federation functions, the Church Order also includes an article about how the members of the church should view the education of their children and the role that the
consistory, the ruling body of the church, has in it. Specifically, the article states that, “The consistory shall ensure that parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions” (Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise, 1984, p. 671).

The churches interpret this article to mean that parents need to take a leadership role in ensuring that their children receive an education that is in keeping with their beliefs as they are expressed in the doctrine of the church (Pouwelse, 1986; Van Oone, 1990). This interpretation, coupled with the strong belief that the, “education of the children and the whole school system is first of all the responsibility of the parents,” has given rise to the belief that, “the school belongs to the parents” (Pouwelse, 1986, p. 23). Though the leadership of the church (the consistory) must work with parents to ensure that they have their children attend a school that is in line with church doctrines, the consistory is neither called to establish, nor oversee, the day-to-day operations of these schools (Pouwelse, 1996; Van Oone, 1990).

Canadian Reformed churches place such a heavy emphasis on an education being in line with their religious belief for several reasons. One has to do with the Dutch immigrant roots of the Canadian Reformed churches, where a history of Christian education based on a Reformed Christian tradition was imported into North America (Sikkema, 2004; Stoffels, 2012; Teeuwsen, 2016). Another has to do with the parents’ personal commitment to raising their children in a way that is harmonious with their worldview and beliefs. This personal commitment is also reflected in the structure of the Canadian Reformed churches.
Rev. W. Van Oone, who wrote extensively on the Canadian Reformed Church Order, explains this personal commitment. The Canadian Reformed churches believe in infant baptism. During baptism, parents vow that they will raise their children in the fear of the Lord to the best of their ability (Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise, 1984). Van Oone (1990) stresses that parents have an obligation to live that vow as they raise their children, and that this obligation includes their choices relating to formal academic education. Parents have this obligation, Van Oone (1990) writes, because they should not permit what they work on building up at home and at church to be broken down by the school they attend. Understanding the stress that is placed on children receiving an education that is aligned with their religious beliefs also explains why parents who are members of the Canadian Reformed churches would willingly submit themselves to the community norms where the consistory of the church helps them to hold fast to their vows.

It should be noted that developing and maintaining a Christian day school is not the only way parents are successfully fulfilling the promises that they made when their children were baptized in the Canadian Reformed churches. Sikkema (2004) and Van Oone (1990) both stress, for instance, that parents are ultimately responsible for answering to their promises. While the church community may express concern with the choices that parents make, there are no structures in place to enforce a decision to send a child to a Canadian Reformed school.

The Two Schools Involved

This study set out to interview parents in leadership positions in three schools belonging to the Canadian Reformed churches. After polling several schools run by
Canadian Reformed church communities, two School Boards responded positively within the allotted period. Since both schools met the established criteria, and they represented both the elementary and secondary school levels, it was decided that they would serve the purposes of the study.

The elementary school chosen for examination in this study was established in 1964. It is in a small town in southern Ontario. During the 2017-18 school year, 131 families sent their children to the school, and the school had a total student population of 313. The school employed approximately 20 teachers, as well as other support staff, a Principal, and a Vice-Principal, and it had a yearly budget of approximately $1.9 million. This budget is funded approximately 70% by tuition paying members, and the other 30% is donated by other members of the Canadian Reformed church community in the area.

The secondary school involved in the study was founded in 1975 and is an urban school in southern Ontario. During the 2017-18 school year, 286 families contributed to the 406 students who attend. The school employs approximately 30 teachers, as well as other support staff including one Principal and two Vice- Principals. It has an annual budget of $4.2 million which, like the elementary school, is funded by tuition paying members and other members of the Canadian Reformed church communities in the Golden Horseshoe area (including some of those who support the elementary school involved in this study).

Both the secondary school and the elementary school have their purposes stated in their articles of incorporation. The purpose of the secondary schools is as follows:

To establish, maintain and conduct a school for the general instruction and education of children in accordance with the infallible Word of God, as confessed
in the Reformed Creeds, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, and directed toward the end that such children may fulfill their God-given calling in Church, Society, and state; ... To hire, engage or otherwise secure the service of Principals, teachers, instructors, or other persons for the promotion and carrying out of the objectives of the Corporation. (Secondary School Board, 1984, p. 1)

The elementary school has a similar purpose found in its constitution. There, it reads:

The basis of the Society shall be the infallible Word of God as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity (The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort). The purpose of the Society shall be to establish and maintain schools for the education of the children of the covenant, so that they may be fully equipped to serve the Lord in all of life. (Elementary School Board, 1988, p. 31)

These statements echo the purpose found in the Canadian Reformed Church’s Church Order, and also parallel explanations found in the supporting documents cited in this study. The school, from the Canadian Reformed perspective, was to be anchored in God’s word, grounded in the confessions of the church, and guided by the objective of helping parents educate children to a life of service to their Lord.

Both schools also specify those who are entitled to be members of their school society – and thus, be able to send their children to the school – in similar ways. By doing so, they describe the community from which the parents and students will be drawn. The high school constitution states that, “all parents and guardians and single persons (including widows and widowers) of 18 years and older are eligible for membership in
the Society provided they are members in good standing of a Canadian Reformed Church (Secondary School Board, 1984, p. 9). The elementary school similarly defines membership in its school society with the statement, “only communicant members of the Canadian Reformed Churches shall be permitted to be members of this Society” (Elementary School Board, 1988, p. 31).

The previous paragraphs were a summary dedicated to introducing the reader to the schools involved in the current study. In brief, it can be understood that parents involved in the Canadian Reformed schools see it as their duty to educate their children – whom they feel belong to God by covenant and promise through baptism – in a school that upholds the Bible as the infallible word of God and that interprets that word through three confessions written in the Reformed Protestant tradition. They send their children to the schools their church community establishes so that their children’s academic education will be consistent with their home and church education, and ultimately, so that these children may grow up to serve God and their neighbours. This summary will serve as a basis from which we can compare the ideal of the school’s operation to the actual experience and engagement of the parents involved in the leadership of the school.

**The Parents**

The parents involved in this study belonged to one of two governance bodies in the school. The first was the School Board, which is responsible for setting polices in the school. The School Board is also the governing body that is legally responsible for the finances involved in the operation of the school. The parents on the School Board meet once a month as Board members and discuss with the Principal and the various committees of the school how the daily operation of the school is faring (Elementary
School Board, 2012; Secondary School Board, 2018). The second governing body that the parents interviewed belonged to is the Education Committee. This committee reports to the School Board, but they have been given authority over what curriculum is taught in the school and the hiring of teaching staff. The Education Committee has been given a strong mandate by the Board, and their decisions require approval by the Board. A parent does not have to be on the Board to be on the Education Committee (Elementary School Board, 2012; Secondary School Board, 1984).

The original aim of this study was to interview four parents from each school involved in the project. Four parents from the elementary school were interviewed. In the secondary school, though, only three parents participated. All the parent participants were involved in leadership roles in the school and were willing to be interviewed. What follows is a brief overview of the participants’ backgrounds as they were willing to share them during the interview process. In addition to the parents, the Principal of the elementary school, and the Vice-Principal from the high school also participated in the study.

Devon is the Chairman of the secondary school involved in this study. He has been married for 25 years and he is the father of four children. His two oldest children have graduated from the school, and his two youngest still attend. One is currently in Grade 12 and the other is in Grade 9. Devon is in his third year on the Board at the school and he estimates that he spends 15 to 20 hours a week on school-related matters. He

1 The names have been altered to protect the privacy of those involved, but the genders of the participants are reflected by the names chosen.
volunteers this amount of time on the school in addition to running a successful landscaping company in the greater Toronto area. When articulating his motivation to be involved in the leadership at the school, Devon spoke about his interest in connecting with teenagers and a sense that the School Board was experiencing some challenges at the beginning of his term that he was motivated to help resolve.

Rachelle is the part owner of a greenhouse company, and she is the mother of four children, two of which are in college, while the other two attend the high school where she serves on the Education Committee. In the past, she has also served on the Board and the Education Committee of an elementary school that is also affiliated with the Canadian Reformed churches (though not the elementary school involved in this study). Rachelle mentioned that she is motivated to be on the Education Committee because she wants to get to know the staff at the schools where her children attend, and she really enjoys being involved in education.

Candice also serves on the Education Committee at the high school level, and prior to that, she served on the high school’s Board of Directors. She is a mother of seven children and she has been married for 23 years. Two of Candice’s children have graduated from the school, and the others are either currently attending, or will be attending. When speaking about her motivation to become involved, Candice speaks about how her interest grew as she became more familiar with the school. She states that she has no background in education or governance at all, but she became more involved and more knowledgeable about the school as she participated in the different roles available to her.
Richard is the Board Chair of the elementary school that was involved in this study. He is in his early 60s and his five children have all graduated from the school already. Now, when he walks the halls, he enjoys seeing his grandchildren at the school. Richard is in his second year of his current terms, and he has served three different terms on the Board through three decades. Twice he served as Treasurer (the first time at the age of 23), and he has experienced many changes throughout his time of involvement. Richard is part of a large landscaping company where he has served for 40 years, and currently holds the titles of Vice-President and Director of Information Technology (IT). Richard estimates that he spends close to 20 hours a week on school-related items. While his initial motivation for being involved was, “They asked!” he has seen the blessing of being involved over the years because he can remain connected with the school, which is really enjoys.

Marinus is 44 years old. He is married with three children, all of whom attend the elementary school where he serves on the Board as Secretary. He is currently in his third year on the Board. While his professional career keeps him from the school during most school hours, he is still able to dedicate 3 to 4 hours a week on school-related matters. He speaks about how he feels a sense of self-motivation to be involved with the school because he sees it as his responsibility as a parent to be involved with his children’s education. He also attests to his motivation to be involved so that he could work with and for other parents in his capacity as a Board member.

Blake is in his late 30s. He has been married for 12 years, and he and his wife have four children, all of whom are currently in elementary school. Blake is a co-owner of a building construction company where he has worked for the past 14 years. Blake
serves on the Board as Transportation Committee Chairman, and he estimates that he
spends around 2 to 3 hours per week on school-related items. If his committee is working
out new bus routes in the summer, then he reports he spends a lot more time, even
holiday time with his family, so that he can get the routes complete for the membership.
Blake speaks about how he is self-motivated to be involved in the school; he loves what
the school stands for, and when they asked if he would let his name stand for nomination,
he “did not hesitate.”

Kathryn is an Registered Nurse (RN), has been married for 20 years, and she and
her husband work together to raise four children who are currently between the ages of
10 and 17. In addition to being on the Board of Directors, Kathryn serves on the
elementary school’s Human Resources Committee. When asked about her motivation to
join the School Board, she spoke about how she, as a parent, wanted to be involved in the
school in a greater way than simply paying tuition. She also feels passionate about the
school and cannot remember a time when she was not.

The Principals

Although not in the initial plan for this study, the interviews with the parents
revealed that the relationship between the parent-run Boards and committees and the
Principal was a key which opened many positive interactions between parents and the
school. To gain a fuller understanding about the impact that the Principal has in a parent-
run school, and how that impact affects parental engagement, the Principals were
contacted to see if they, too, would be willing to be part of the research study. The
Principals in both schools consented, and interview questions were modified slightly to
fit the new context (see Appendix B).
Gary, the Principal at the elementary school, has been working in Canadian Reformed schools for 31 years. For 25 of those years, he has served as a Principal. He has worked with many different parents and experienced many different Boards. In the school where he currently serves, he works with teachers to improve their practice, works with parents to help shape their understanding of the school, and works with students so that he has a direct impact on their teaching and learning.

At the secondary school, Peter has been working as the Vice-Principal for 10 years, and this year, he is serving as acting Principal while the school works through the process of hiring a person to take over the job full-time. His role in the school before this year was Vice-Principal of Academics, and as such, he has had a lot of experience with the Education Committee at the school. In that capacity, he was working with parents as together, they made educational decisions, built policy for the school, and developed protocols for conducting classroom visits in the school.

**Data Collection**

Yin (2009) writes that data collected from case studies may be derived from six different sources. This case study will attempt to collect evidence from three of those six, including sources. These are: documentation, archival records, and interviews. Collection from multiple sources increases the reliability of the conclusions of the case study because its findings will be corroborated through multiple sources with converging facts, or the formation of a chain of evidence that aligns the questions asked, the data collected, and the conclusions that are drawn (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009).

The data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews. The Principal Investigator (PI) of this study conducted the interviews with parents and
Principals who serve in schools affiliated with the Canadian Reformed Church Federation. The parents and Principals were each interviewed separately, and the interviews lasted between 45 and 65 minutes. Because the interview protocol was semi-structured, the questions were open-ended, and they addressed the role parents have in the school and how it affects a parent’s feeling of being engaged with their child’s school (see Appendix A and Appendix B).

Archival data was requested and collected from each school, as well. Each school’s constitution and by-laws were used to shed light on why the school was established and the role that the school’s founders felt that parents should play in their child’s education. Collection of this data helped develop a clear understanding of how and why the school was set up in the community.

In each school, current handbooks that are used to outline the mission and vision for the school, as well as the policies by which the school governs, were collected, as well. These policies were used to compare the current role of parents within the school with what is written in the official documents.

In the collection of data, the chain of evidence was kept by building a handwritten database as the information from the interviews was coded and linked to the case study protocol. These pieces of data were linked back to specific sections of the interviews and linked, where applicable, to both each school’s foundational documents and policy documents. By developing this chain of evidence, a line may be drawn that connects the research questions to the data collection and analysis. The purpose of this chain will be to ensure the reliability of the conclusions based on the evidence gathered (Yin, 2009).
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Procedure

Before conducting the interviews with the parents and Principals from the participating groups, an interview protocol and consent forms were developed (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Further, the interview questions were tested in a pilot study. One parent was chosen for the pilot study; this parent was known to the interviewer and had experience on the School Board in a school that belongs to the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies, but not one of the schools involved in this study. This pilot study was implemented to ensure that the interview addressed the research questions effectively and that they were clearly worded and understood. This pilot also ensured that the questions were neither too detailed nor too general (Creswell, 2014).

The participants in the official study were told that the purpose of the study was to explore how the opportunity to hold governing positions in private schools affects parental engagement in their child’s education. Parents were interviewed who hold positions in the School’s Boards and/or Education Committees which belong to the Canadian Reformed Christian school system. After the interviews were transcribed, I, as the Principal Investigator, analysed the data gleaned from them to make observations about how being in a leadership position affects a parent’s engagement in their child’s school. The participants were also told that the answers they provided will serve to fill gaps in the literature surrounding parent-run schools and parental engagement.

Data Analysis

Once the data in the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, copies of the transcripts were sent the participants. The participants were reminded that they had the
right to review and clarify statements made or ask that their transcripts not be used for the study.

Once the transcripts were finalized, I followed the advice of Creswell (2014) and read the data in their entirety several times, making notes and observations in the margins. Once this step was complete, the text was coded in an intuitive way using the research questions as a basis for the categories used. The text was coded in this way so that the data could be summarized and compared thematically, as different themes presented themselves during the coding process. This process also helped with the selection of specific data to use in the study, while other datum was set aside because they did not specifically provide evidence for the research questions being explored (Creswell, 2014).

After the data was coded, it was reviewed to build a better understanding of any themes that were revealed. This review was done across the various participants and across the answers to the research questions asked. Some of the themes that arose from the data included the importance of the relationship between the parents in leadership positions and the Principal. Another theme was how the participants defined the “school’s community,” and the importance of that community in the operations of the school. These themes, as well as the responses to the research questions above, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

**Scope and Limitations of the Study**

As a former teacher and Principal in the school system in question, the I acknowledge that I have some insight into the populations which took part in this study. I am also well-known to the Canadian Reformed Church community and as such, I am not
a stranger to most of those who participated in the interviews. The familiarity with the Canadian Reformed church community and some of the participants had some implications for the study, which can be both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage was that I had the background needed to understand the school system; understanding the system meant that the study could focus on answering the questions presented, without getting sidetracked trying to understand the system in which the participants worked and the church community in which they lived. This advantage was also a disadvantage at times, however. Since the participants assumed the interviewer’s inside knowledge, they were perhaps less clear in how they described the context in which they worked in the school. Where this lack of clarity seemed apparent, the interviewer worked to ask for clarifying details during the interview process.

Though accepted qualitative study methods were used for this study, limitations of the study are also recognized. The first limitation of the study is that there is a small number of schools being sampled from within only one system of schools. This size limitation leads to restrictions on how transferable the findings may be to other school systems (Firestone, 1993). Several steps were taken to help increase the transferability of the findings, however. One way to help build transferability is to know and describe the context of the research well (Firestone, 1993; Polit & Beck, 2010). The researcher involved in this study has spent many years working with the schools in question, and therefore, understands the context of the schools well. Time is spent in the study describing the system to the reader so that the reader will understand the context comprehensively, as well. The researcher also transcribed and coded the data himself. This was done with the specific intent of being as familiar as possible with the data. This
strategy, too, has been proven as effective for increasing the transferability of qualitative research involving small sample case studies (Polit & Beck, 2010).

Another limitation with the study is that the schools in question are not typically diverse ethnically or socioeconomically. The population of the schools in question belong to the same religious group and therefore, the findings may not be transferable to other populations who do not share in their view on education or their sense of community. Other schools where parents play an important role were not interviewed; these other schools could include private, non-religious schools, other faith-based private schools which are affiliated with either other Christian denominations or Muslim or Jewish faiths. The purpose of this study was to explore how having governing positions in a school affects parental engagement, and thus, a clear first step would be to introduce a community whose schools exemplify this style of governance. This will allow for one unique case to be used to test previous theories about the effect of parental engagement to increase transferability (Firestone, 1993).

Finally, there was the limitation of time. As the student researcher was the only one conducting and transcribing the interviews, and there was a preferred end date for the study, more schools were not approached after two agreed to participate to ensure adequate time for data analysis.

**Ethical Considerations**

The research that was undertaken followed standard data collection techniques of interviewing using semi-structured, open-ended questions. There were risks involved for those who participated (Merriam, 1991). For instance, respondents may have felt unsure about their answers or preferred not to answer certain questions for various reasons. This
unwillingness to answer may have increased the respondent’s unease, since they may have felt it violated the implicit contract that they had with the interviewer (Kelman, 1982, as cited in Merriam, 1991). To alleviate this concern, the researcher endeavored to put the participants at ease by letting them know in the process leading up to the interview that they were free to choose not to answer any questions that they felt made them uncomfortable or that they felt they did not have adequate information for.

Before the process of finding participants began, approval was sought and received from the Brock University Research and Ethics Board (REB) (File-16-283). As outlined in the application for the REB, the researcher endeavoured to keep the identity of the participants and the schools in which they lead confidential. Personal names, titles, and contact information was collected as the researcher identified and invited possible participants. The participants’ contact information was retained in the computer associated with the research. Once the data collection was complete, and the participants reviewed the transcript of the interview in which they participated, the personal identifiers were deleted from the computer. The interviews took place at times and places that were convenient to the participants. Pseudonyms were used in the writing and when quoting. Descriptions of participants were included so that the reader will understand the context surrounding the participants’ lives as it related to their involvement with the school. These were included with the participants’ consent.

**Summary**

This study investigated the impact that holding leadership positions in schools has on parental engagement with their children’s education. This study used a collective case study approach which allowed the research to focus on more than one case, providing an
opportunity to investigate the general condition of the schools involved from more than one perspective. The choice to use a collective case study was made to add credibility to the findings of the research (Creswell, 2014). In all, nine participants from two schools were interviewed. The schools involved were both located in southern Ontario. The interviews were open-ended in nature and were guided by the research questions developed through investigating themes in the literature. These open-ended interview questions also allowed new themes to emerge as the data were analysed.

Thus far, this paper has highlighted the literature and methodology used for this study. Now, it will move forward to explore findings from the data that were collected as described in Chapter Four that proceeds.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, the purpose of the study will be restated briefly to serve as the context for the findings. In addition, the school’s basic foundational model and the important role that parents play, as described in Chapter 2, will be situated within the context of a cooperative and supportive school framework. Using this framework as a model for developing a school where there is maximum parental engagement, this chapter will look at how parents are given the authority to act as the tie that binds the vision of the school together. Parents have this authority because parents on the Board are the ones who develop policies that are in line with both government requirements and local school needs. Here, parents are working hand-in-hand with the Principal to ensure that the school provides an education that satisfies their children’s needs through both staffing and curriculum. Finally, parents hold the vision for the school so that the education provided is in line with their local community norms.

Purpose of the Study and the Supportive Cooperative Framework

This study aims to explore how holding governance positions impacts parental engagement in two private Christian Schools. In these schools, parents control the vision of the school and have the final say in almost all aspects of the school’s operation. Much can be learned by looking at the way that parents use and develop policies, the relationships that exist between the parents and the Principal, and the way that the parents see and work with both the community surrounding the school and the supporting community as found in particular Protestant Christian school societies in Ontario. Throughout the description of the findings, attempts will be made to tie the interviewees’ experiences to the cooperative and supportive framework described in Chapter Two. By
outlining what the parents and the Principals interviewed say about the school and how it operates, this chapter also hopes to show how parents holding governing positions can affect the tensions that other actors – for instance, the central administrative office, school personnel, and the community – place on a school.

**Parental Governance by Policy: The School Board and Education Committee**

Asking the participants questions surrounding how they feel that the governance position they belong to – either the School Board, Education Committee, and/or the Principal – contributes to the school is really asking how they see the dynamics between the policies of the school and how it is enacted. Policies in a school are often developed by a central authority – in this case, the School Board, though it is influenced by government requirements – and then handed down to the staff of the school. Once they are in place, these policies not only affect those who are in the school, but also those who support it, like parents.

As demonstrated in an earlier chapter, each school in this study is governed by a combination of a constitution, corporate by-laws, and handbooks that collectively outline the responsibilities of the various groups involved in such governance processes. Both the secondary school and the elementary school have these documents, and the revision dates show that they have been revisited since the schools’ founding. The oldest revision date on the documents received from both schools was 2013, and the latest revision was 2018 (in fact, it was received while this paper was being written). All the participants spoke of their involvement in writing and revising policy, as well, which makes it clear that the operation of these schools is affected by policy, and that policy plays an important role in the work that the parents do when they are involved.
When reviewing the instances when the interviewees spoke about policy, three themes rose to the surface. First, policy helped to shape the role that each governance actor played in the school. The second was that policies are a necessary part of running the school in an effective way. Lastly, the third theme that arose from the interviews was the participants understood that the policies serve to unify the school with the home and the supporting church community.

**Policy for Governance is Shaped by Parents**

Each of the interviewees spoke about how their role in the school was defined by policy. Sometimes it was in terms of the Board committees they were involved in, like Blake, Candice, and Kathryn. These three spoke of how their roles were defined by the duties that they had to complete. For instance, Blake knew that he was responsible for making sure that the busses for the elementary school were running well. He had this responsibility because he chaired a Transportation Committee. As a committee, they made decisions surrounding, “safety, how the drivers deal with certain things, like, misbehavior, accidents, (and) parents.” They also took care of developing bus routes, hiring bus drivers, and managing behaviour policy for when students were on the bus. He also knew that there was potential for conflict between parents, bus drivers, and possibly even the Principal when it came to student behaviour. In each case, he spoke to how the Principal and parents have their roles, the bus drivers theirs, and how the policy surrounding the Transportation Committee was effective in managing conflicts in this area.

Candice spoke about the importance of policy, as well. When speaking about the role that the Education Committee plays at the secondary school, she said that the role is,
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“quite well-defined.” In the Education Committee, the parents visit staff in their classrooms on a regular basis. The committee has a handbook that spells out both what their role is in the classroom and what their role is not. They are there to observe a classroom in action and support the teacher by asking questions about the year and about the teachers’ experiences with the school society and the curriculum they teach. Candice was also clear that the committee was not there to evaluate the staff members’ professional performance; that, she said, was the distinct role of the Principal.

Peter, the Principal of the high school, spoke about how policies worked in the school, as well. He noted that the parents on the committee are very aware of the difficulty separating the person of the teacher from what is happening in the classroom. Sometimes, he said, “you will get some foggy and fuzzy areas.” When that happened, though, he did not blame unclear policy, but rather new people. He said, “In times when you have transitions. You get new Board members … (or) new admin people and they do not have things clearly defined in their heads what the roles are.” He also noted that the parents who are building and working with these policies are open and aware of the possible tensions. In his experience, the parents on the Board and committees, as well as the Principal, work to hold each other to account. When dealing with tensions between the various groups, for instance, they can say to each other, “You may give your input, but this is their decision.”

**Policy is Necessary for Effective Parental Governance**

Tying into how tensions between the various actors in a school are dealt with, Kathryn spoke about how Board members, who are also parents, are aware of the possible conflicts of interest that may arise at the elementary school. When asked about
how she, a Board member, would be expected to raise a concern about something that was happening in her child’s class, she replied, “I think you would follow the same steps as if you were not on the Board. You would write a letter to the Board and it would be treated just as a letter from another parent.” She concluded that Board members are expected to follow policy like any other parent. Because the Board members had to follow the same procedures as the parents, it meant that if there was a problem, parents who were Board members would need to speak with the teacher first, then the Principal, and, if there was still a problem, Board members would write a letter to the Board and expect to be treated as any other parent. This answer was echoed by Devon, Richard, and Marinus, as well.

When Gary was asked whether he had witnessed parents abusing their positions of authority to meet their own ends, he could not think of an example. He stated that in his 31 years of being involved in Canadian Reformed schools, he has not seen a parent take advantage of their position for their or their child’s personal gain. That no parent takes advantage of their position does not mean that the Board at his school is being complacent, though. They are purposeful about separating how a Board member acts when he or she is on a Board, and when he or she in the school as a parent. He said,

All the Board members … in the school understand their role. That … you are a Board member of the school; therefore, these are the parameters within which you work. These are the parameters and you don’t step out of those parameters. Because yes, you are in a leadership position, but that does not give you license to run amuck in the school.
As mentioned above, Peter, in his experience as a secondary school administrator, mentions that there are times when the roles “get fuzzy.” As noted, he also mentions that the roles mostly get fuzzy in times when there are new people on the Board or in the administration of the school. Specifically, he mentions a time when a long-time Principal retired from the secondary school. This Principal was a strong, skilled leader, and there were people who perhaps resented the control that he had over the school. When that Principal retired, Peter reported, there were some who saw it as an opportunity for the parents on the Board to, “take control again. They said now it is going to be a Board run school instead of a Principal run school.” Peter continues to say that the pressure happens the other way in the school, as well. For instance, if you have a strong Board chairman, or a few vocal Board members, there are some tensions possible there, as well. In the end though, Peter says, these tensions are able to balance themselves out because the spheres of authority are well-defined and followed. He recounts from experience:

Now if you get a strong Board chairman who can say, either to a Principal – hey you know what, that is none of your business. In a kind way. You know, that is outside of your jurisdiction. Or, (the Principal) might have to say it to Board members too. (The Principal) might say that the Board members need to lay off because (a matter) is within the jurisdiction of the admin team. And, generally, we have had that.

Within this school, there have been examples when the parent-run Board has told the Principal to back down on an issue because it is not inside his sphere of authority, and vice versa. Both the people and the personalities that they bring to the table are important, but the governing policies that have been put in place allow the school to function well.
Both Gary and Peter have decades of experience working with parent-run Boards. Both relate that there can be challenges in keeping the role of parent separate from the role of Board member. For the most part, however, the roles and special interests that the parents have in the governance of the school are kept separate from the roles and special interests they would have as parents of students in the school. Gary and Peter also agree that this separation is done intentionally and while it is not perfect, their experience shows that these pressures are well-managed.

Policy Guides a Unity of Purpose with Parents

Policy does mean more for the school and its governing parents than simply supplying the rules for engagement and interacting with the school’s members and employees. All those interviewed also mentioned, for example, that policy served as part of the glue that bound the school sphere to the spheres of the home and the community. Every participant spoke about how the policies developed to guide those in governance positions were intended to provide maximum involvement for parents sending their children to the school and the community that supports it. That policies were developed to maximize involvement can be seen in several ways.

Peter, Devon, Richard, Marinus, and Gary spoke about how those who are in leadership positions are chosen with a mind to bringing maximum representation to the Board from the church communities. Devon noted that there was specific policy in place in the constitution and by-laws that governed who could be on the School Board and how they work with that policy. A look at the secondary school’s policy confirms that regional Board members need to belong to a local Board, which is based in a local church that promotes membership in the school. The job of the local Board is to look after the local
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finances for the school, promote the school to the members of the local church, and ensure student transportation is available to the school from the local area (Secondary School Board, 2018). These local Boards appoint one member each to serve as one of the 17 regional Board representatives. Devon, who is Chairman of the secondary school, explains how it works and some of the challenges involved with the process:

There is one regional representative that is selected from every church membership and there are 17 churches, so there are 17 representatives. The selection of that is a bit of challenge. Sometimes you have a great person. An existing member will select someone who is truly gifted and qualified and has experience. Other times, there is frustration and they just put in a cold body. That is a bit of challenge, but as a chairman and as an executive that is something that we are working on. You look at those that are new and fresh coming in, what type of training do they receive. How are we encouraging them, how are we preparing them for the role that they will have to carry out for the next three years?

Making sure that the Board members are quality Board members is a challenge, one that the parents in the school leadership are aware of. But, each local Board has, at minimum, 5 members, and allows for a minimum of 85 parents and/or members of the school society to be part of the secondary school’s governing body in some way (Secondary School Board, 2018). This large number of parents means that there is a wide cross section of people to draw quality Board members from.

Richard, who chairs the elementary school, notes the same push for a broad membership involvement in the elementary School Board. The elementary School Board is also made up of different representatives from the local churches which support the
school. Since the elementary school serves only four congregations, there are two Board members from each congregation on the elementary Board (Elementary School Board, 2012). These members are chosen so that the congregations will have equal representation on the Board, and thus be able to speak to the local needs of the members even as they guide the overall vision for the school. They are also chosen because as individuals, they have shown themselves to be invested in the school. For instance, when speaking about why he became involved, Blake said:

I don’t know if I really decided to be part of it, or if I was asked to become part of it. I have always been interested in the school. It has always been near and dear to my heart. I’ve done volunteering there. I’ve done some work there helping out the building committee. A little while later I got the call to see if I would stand for nomination to the Board. I did not hesitate. It was something that I was looking forward to, something different. Something to get a little more involved and see how the gears all turn.

Kathryn echoes this willingness to be involved when she says:

I had always attended the membership meetings, and my husband had been on the Board before, so I had some knowledge of what he had to do. Attending different school functions, going on trips with kids, attending assemblies for special occasions. Going to the school for that. Meeting with the teachers for Parent Teacher interviews. I am also involved in fundraising aspects for the school, like our annual bazaar … I was approached to see if I was interested in being on the Board. I said yes, and the membership voted me in at a membership meeting.
In these instances, both Blake and Kathryn speak of being selected from their local church communities because they displayed an interest in the school at a local level. Once they were on the Board, though, they took over global responsibilities: Blake with the whole school’s transportation needs, and Kathryn with the school’s Human Resource Committee.

This desire for a local voice at the overall Board level does not just live on the pages of the constitution and by-laws, however; each parent interviewed mentions it in some way. Peter, a Principal at the secondary school, mentions this balance, too. When he speaks about finding people for the Education Committee, for instance, which deals with matters related to the curriculum and the methods by which it is taught, he said:

Our school services a pretty wide geographic area, but it only services families who attend the Canadian Reformed … Churches … We try to respect that at school as well. With the students, the Board, the Education Committee, and we as teachers want to be sure that we are servicing our community. We call ourselves a parent-run school. It is parents that make up the Board and the Education Committee, and so we want to reflect that in how we organize the school as well.

The Education Committee, Peter says, is purposefully chosen so that its six members represent the urban and rural sectors of the Canadian Reformed churches. Though they are not too concerned about having representation of the specific congregations involved, Peter noted that the school and the parents are best able to work together when those who need to make challenging decisions about teaching resources are representative of what is valued in the different geographic areas.
Gary, Marinus, and Richard each spent some time speaking about how the Board of the elementary school was working to change the way the Board operates. Richard summarized the changes by saying that the Board was working to change from, “a doing Board, to a governing Board.” Marinus speaks about the changing role of the Board, as well. He describes how the Board is currently very hands-on: Board members are physically involved in fixing the things that need to be fixed, thus spending more time on the bricks and mortar of the school than on the membership’s vision for what great education looks like. Marinus describes how they are working to change:

I’d have to break that down a little further, (the Board’s role) is directing, protecting, and inspecting. The directing is about shaping the strategic direction of the school. I believe that the Board has not done that really well. I would point to the lack of a five-year strategic plan. What the Board has done well with protecting. The Board has protected the reputation of the school, protected the financial stability of the school. It has invested in good teachers and the staff. It has generated, and this is not an exclusive privilege that the Board can claim, it has generated a lot of parental support over the years. I think that that is one area of the school that they can be expanding on. In terms of inspecting, I think that is another area that the Board could do some more work on.

Marinus said that the Board understands that it needs to direct the school in accordance to the by-laws. He also states that the Board needs to protect the school by promoting best practices at all levels. It is the protection aspect that he points to as how the school has garnered ‘a lot of parental support over the years.’ When it comes to the
Board’s inspecting role, to make certain that the school continues to operate well and serve the needs of the students, Marinus notes that there is some work to do.

Gary speaks of the changes mention by Marinus, as well. He also talks about the move toward better practices. He mentions that, in the past, the Board would choose executive positions – the Treasurer for instance – based on who had the most skill in the area of finance out of the people on the Board at that time. In recent years, the Board is more aware of the positions that need to be filled in the executive. When new names are proposed for Board positions from the supporting Canadian Reformed congregations, they choose the names by ensuring that those nominated have skill sets which match the vacancies. He states:

If you are looking, for example, (to nominate) for the Board executive, then you are looking for people who have experience in leadership. If you are looking for a Chairman of the Board. If you are somebody with finance experience in terms of a Treasurer. A Secretary, Board Secretary, Vice-Chair … some semblance of leadership especially in your executive positions.

When it comes to how policy works in the schools involved in this study, one can see evidence of its importance. Policy provides guidelines for those involved so they know what their role in the school is and what it is not. Policy allows for relatively smooth operation in terms of keeping the parent and Board roles from mixing, and the Board and Principal roles from being in conflict. Finally, policy in the Canadian Reformed schools provides a purposeful glue that works to keep the students’ homes and church communities connected to the school in a meaningful and balanced way.
Parental Governance and the Principal

The parents in governing positions at the school also spoke much about the role of the Principal in the school. When the parents’ comments were coded and the times that they spoke about the Principal were examined, four themes emerged. The first was the importance that the parents in the Board and the Education Committees put on the relationship between the Principal and the rest of the school staff. The second was the value parents saw in the Principal’s role in the supporting community. The third was the how much the Board and Education Committee relied on the Principals’ expertise. And finally, the fourth theme that emerged was that a harmonious relationship between the parental leaders and the Principal has a lot to do with the personalities of the people involved.

The Principal and the Staff

When speaking about the Principal and his relationship with the staff, the parents interviewed were unanimous in their view that the Principal’s most important role was in staff training and supervision. When asked what he felt was the Principal’s most important role, Blake put it very succinctly: “He’s the teacher’s boss!” he exclaimed. Marinus echoes Blake; he names the Principal, “The staff’s manager.” Candice looks at the matter slightly differently. She says that the Principal is there to, “ensure professionalism in the staff.” Kathryn phrases the same sentiment in a different way when she says that the Principal’s main task is to, “help staff increase their skills.” All these statements show that teacher training and supervision are at the top of the parent leaders’ minds when they think about what the Principal’s role is.
Devon and Marinus both focus on the Principal’s managerial role. Devon wants the Principal to, “challenge the teachers to continue to improve.” He wants the Principal to know the staff and motivate them to be better teachers tomorrow than they are today. Marinus conceptualizes the Principal in the same way, stating that it is the Principal’s job to, “handle issues surrounding performance.” Marinus also points out that,

If the Principal cannot handle the conflicts around a performance issue, my expectation would be that the Principal would come to the HR committee, or depending on the nature of it, maybe directly back to the Board. But again, my experience is that the Principal or the Vice-Principal has been able to handle these issues themselves. As an HR committee member, I have met with the Principal and the Vice-Principal to solve some of those issues, to problem solve. But I see the Board’s role as more of a consultative role in that process.

If the Principal is not able to handle an issue with a staff member, the Board has a Human Resource Committee that is ready and willing to help navigate the challenge. However, in the end, the Board sees themselves as consultants, not the boss.

Peter’s statements about the Principal’s role with the school’s staff is similar to that of the parents, but Gary has a different take on it. Peter addresses what he sees as the Principal’s main role twice during his interview, once at the beginning and once toward the end. Both times, he notes that teacher supervision, training, and professional development are important to the role. The second time he addressed it, he said,

The Principal’s main task is teacher supervision, as in any other school. I think that is the Principal’s main job to make sure that teachers are getting the support
That they need. That they are getting the training that they need. That they are getting pushed as much as they need as well, to improve themselves.

Gary, the Principal at the elementary school, never mentions supervising teachers at all. When asked what he viewed as the most important role of the Principal, he states that he is the leader of the school first (meaning the whole school), and then that he is a leader of teachers. He explains it a little further with these words:

I guess you could say that I am a servant leader. By that I mean you’re here, yes as the leader in the school, as the Principal of the school. But, you are also serving the community. You are serving your staff. You are serving your students. In that way I feel … I am most effective as a leader in the school.

Looking at the Principal role as being a servant leader is a distinct way of looking at the Principal’s role from what the others said. It is also one that may help explain another important role that the Principal has regarding the teaching staff. It is the Principal’s role to represent staff matters to the Board and Education Committee. Both Peter and Gary note that the Principal is the staff representative at the Board and Education Committee. While Gary did not provide a specific example, Peter did. He mentions that the Principal will be the voice of the staff at the Board and Education Committee levels. When the parental leadership groups have a proposal, for instance, Peter mentions that it is his job to say, “OK, these are great and lofty ideas, but when it comes to the nitty gritty, here is how this is going to affect our teachers.”

Peter also mentions that he represents the teachers by bringing forward proposals to the Board. An example that he used, which was also mentioned by Candice in her interview, was a conference that the high school had on the topic of truth in the light of
Bible. Both Peter and Candice explained that the conference topic was chosen because truth in the light of the Bible was a topic that the staff wanted to address with the students. It was the Principal, though, who made the initial proposal to the Education Committee. From there, it moved on to the Board before the plan was put into action. Both Rachelle and Devon also mention that at the secondary school’s Education Committee, heads of departments also present their work directly to the parents on the committee. Peter acknowledges that the department heads are at the Education Committee meetings, too, but states that any push for change or implementation of something new is the Principal’s responsibility.

The Principal and the Community

The parents that were interviewed also saw the Principal as being the face of the school to the broader community. Blake and Rachelle both mention that the Principal is the face of the school specifically, but comments made by others points to the public role of the Principal, as well. Devon mentions that to him, it is very important that the Principal does his work with joy and enthusiasm. That is what students see, he says, and, “if [Principals] are not liking what they are doing, if they are not positive about what they are doing, then other people are not positive in what they are doing also.” Devon sees the Principal as the one who sets the tone by example.

Marinus points out that the, “the Principal has a lot of interaction with the parent community. I would not want to see the Board to interfere with that relationship.” Kathryn speaks about the role of the Principal in the parent community in another way, saying that the Principal, “needs to be the eyes and ears of the school,” knowing what is going on not only inside the school, but also inside the supporting communities. Blake
sees the importance of the Principal being in touch with the people in the school, too, saying that the Principal needs to be, “in the know,” and able to share that knowledge with the Board as they make decisions.

Both Peter and Gary, as Principals, see knowing what is going on in the school as important, as well. Peter spoke about how his role as acting Principal in the secondary school means that he must know the school well so that he can keep the Education Committee and the Board informed of any potential challenges that they may face from parents in the community. Gary spoke of knowing the community, too, saying that he sees one of his most important jobs as being sure that he can represent the school to the community, but also represent the community to the School Board by, “being informed about everything.”

**The Principal as Expert**

The Principal’s role in the school is very important; all the interviewees stressed that. The Principal is called out as the expert, the advisor, the one in the know. He is also a policy writer for the Board and a member of multiple committees. These committees include two where the Principal must work very closely with parents to make important decisions that will affect the school. The first is the Education Committee and the second is the Human Resources Committee.

The Education Committee in the elementary school is mandated to:

a) Consider all matters pertaining to the educational program and policies of (the school) and make recommendations concerning these to the Board;

b) Monitor the general tone and atmosphere of (the school) and its classrooms, and to work with the staff in formulating policies and proposals that will enable
the school to be an exemplary Reformed, Christian community. (Elementary School Board, 2012, p. 37)

The secondary school’s Education Committee mandate is similar in its scope and purpose:

The Education Committee is a standing committee of the Board and has as its primary responsibility the task of advising the Board with respect to the professional quality, scholastic quality, of the school's faculty and program as well as student behaviour. (Secondary School Board, 1984, p. 7)

In both schools, the Education Committee holds a key function, which both Gary and Peter call the most important committee in the school. The parents on this committee visit active classrooms on a regular basis. They watch students learning and observe teachers instructing. They also bring proposals to the Board having to do with all areas of teaching and learning in the school (as we have seen above). Yet, the Principal has no vote on this committee. In fact, the Principal is ex-officio on all committees in the school. As Gary puts it, the Principal is the expert, and he, “is able to influence, but the parents are the ones who govern.” Parents get to vote, but they do so on the merits of the proposals put in front of them.

The lack of a vote is the same with the schools’ Human Resource Committees, which are the committees that handle the hiring of staff in both schools. As mentioned before, the Principal is considered the manager of the staff, he is present during staff interviews, and he is responsible for staff improvement. But, as Candice revealed, “the Principal does not have voting privileges. That would apply to hiring as well.”
This tension between having the Principal as an expert, but not having an official say through a committee vote, is an interesting theme that comes up on more than one occasion. Each participant in this study was asked a question like, “If the Board or Education Committee where to disagree with the Principal, who’s word would carry more weight?” What was surprising about the reaction to this question was the length of time that elapsed before each respondent answered it. Even Gary, who has 32 years of experience with parents, did not have a ready situation that he could use as a reference for this question. Each one had to think hard to find an example, and some were not able to come up with any. In the end, all the participants agreed that the parents in the committees or the Board would vote based on their own understanding of the issue, and that the Principal would need to back down. They also agreed that this type of situation did not happen often (and the time it took to think of a response shows this, too). They considered themselves a team, and as Rachelle mentions, even though the Principal has no vote, he has an equal role on the committee and they work together to solve challenges.

The Principal and Personalities

There were times during the interviews where the parents and the Principal mentioned that things did not always run smoothly. Hints that the current easy comradery between the parents on the Board and Education Committee and the Principal has not always been the constant. It is interesting to note that not every parent interviewed expressed that there was trouble in the past, nor did each Principal. There were enough times when past struggles were mentioned, though, that it is worth noting.
Devon touches on past troubles when he speaks about how he came to be the Chairman of the Board of Directors. He mentions that he was approached by several parents who were hoping that he would be willing join the Board and, “serve at the leadership level and help with some concerns, some issues that were going on at the time.” When asked about how he learned of those concerns before he was a Board member, Devon explained, “I had couple of Board members come and talk to me about how to handle certain situations, … how to motivate the existing Board that was there.” From this acknowledgment, one gets a sense that the school was not running smoothly. There were situations that some Board members felt needed to be dealt with that and were not being resolved to their satisfaction. That these conversations happened also gives one the sense that, unlike Gary’s experience, there are Board members who work quite actively to ensure that their voice and their concerns are met.

Devon mentions trouble again later in the interview when he speaks about a previous Principal who had since moved on to a position in a new school. Devon expresses that both the Principal and the Board should be, “the face of joy and enthusiasm, and model those Christian characters on a daily basis.” When asked if the Board and the Principal being the face of joy and enthusiasm has been his experience, he states,

In the past it hasn’t. In the past four or five years, under the reign of our predecessor that has moved on, it was not an engaged person in the sense of making sure that the vision of the school was manifested through the workings and the teachings and the management of the staff.
Devon does not place the responsibility for this lack of enthusiasm on the Principal, though. He looks to the parents in the Board during those years and states that, “the Board did not identify or speak to the Principal in understanding … there was a connectivity issue there, so things fell a little bit to the wayside.”

Peter speaks about this potential for conflict, too, and his experience may be related to Devon’s observation about the responsibility that the Board must connect well with the Principal. As mentioned above, Peter noted that after a “strong leader” retired, some Board members came on to the Board with the idea that they could put parents back in control of the school. Peter also mentioned that during those first years after the “strong leader” retired, the School Board made some decisions that were, “pretty heavy handed” and not in line with what the school administration team felt should happen. While Peter asked that the details of this event be kept confidential, he was willing to share this as an example of some tensions that can arise between the Principal and parental leadership. When asked how these challenges get resolved, Peter revealed that that two things are involved. To summarize, he stated the first way to resolve challenges is to rely on policy. The leaders in the school – being the Board, Education Committee members, and Principal – are called on to follow the policy that is in place. The other way to resolve challenges is to understand the personality or the character of those involved. Peter says that a large part of the challenge to get along can be found in the personality of those with the authority to uphold policy. Either the Principal or the Board and committee Chairs, for instance, may not have the, “gumption to say, ‘OK, you need to lay off now.’” Peter cites the heavy handedness of the Board at times as an example of what could happen when you have Board members whose characters do not align with
those on the administrative team. When asked if the ability to be heavy handed was a result of the structure of the governance model, he said, “No, it was more just personality.” However, he also mentions that this example is the only time in his experience where the school’s Board and administration team (meaning Principal and Vice- Principals) were not on the same side when it came down to making a final decision. So, while the personalities and the characters of the people involved are important, they do not often get in the way of making decisions that all parties are content with.

Richard remembers when there were strained relationships between the Board and a previous Principal at the elementary school. This experience was during his first two terms on the Board. He describes the relationship as, “very confrontational.” He goes on to say, “it was maybe lack of experience on the Board members, about how to manage a strong individual, I’m not sure. That was very confrontational, it was painful. It hurt the school, the teachers as well as the students.” Richard then goes on to speak about how the Board would work to solve these types of conflicts. He states that the most important component in the Board and the Principal relationship is they work from the same base. “We are a covenant school,” he said, referring to the promises that parents make when they baptize their child, “we assist parents. That is the Board’s responsibility as well as the teachers’ responsibility, as well as the Principal’s responsibility.” When all the parties can agree on that, Richard said, “we can talk our way to an agreeing position.” Again, there is the acknowledgement that the personality of the people involved can impact the relationship between the Board and the Principal, but the system’s common goal has a way of softening the power any one person has to sway the school.
Looking at the three instances where there was discord between the Principal and the Board, one will note that most times, it was the participant’s perspective that they were the result of a relational breakdown due to personality: twice it was the personalities of the people on the Board, and once it was the personality of the Principal. In both schools, though, the situation was temporary: either the Board members retired, or the Principal moved on when there was conflict and tension on the Board and the relationships were not going well. Through the majority of years in which the school operated, the Principal and the parent leaders were both willing and able to work out solutions that benefited the school and, most importantly, were in line with the shared purpose of assisting parents to educate their children in a way that is in line with their religious beliefs.

**Parental Governance and the Community**

All nine participants in the study spoke extensively about the importance of the community when it comes to running the school well. Many decisions were made with what the participants called ‘community’ in mind. To understand the importance that the parent leaders and the Principal placed on community, it is important to look at three things: how the participants defined ‘community’, why participants felt that community is so important, and how belonging to the community has influenced a parent’s decision to become involved in the leadership of the school.

**What is Meant by ‘Community?’**

Throughout the interviews, the participants referred to the school’s community. They used phrases such as, “In our community, we …” and, “We are careful to engage our community by …. ” There are committees in place to help with community
Parental Engagement in Leadership at School

engagement. The Board and Education Committee members are chosen from certain areas of the community. In fact, the participants mentioned the word ‘community’ an average of 17 times during the hour or less of interview time. The frequency in which they mentioned the word shows that community is an important aspect of running a Canadian Reformed school. The question remains, though: what is meant by – or perhaps better, *who* is meant by – ‘community.’

When asked this question, the participants all answered that to them, ‘community’ means people who belong to their church. For instance, Peter mentioned that the people in the Education Committee at the high school were chosen because they were from either urban or rural parts of the community. When asked why, he explained how the *churches* from those areas see certain things differently. He said, “We definitely find that there are different views on education, on church, and life in the church across our regions, and variation within each region as well. But there is a fairly clear rural and urban split.”

When Candice spoke about the conference about truth and sexuality that the high school hosted, she also spoke about how it was important that the community understood what the school was working to do. When speaking about the conference, she also reveals a little about who the school’s community *is not*:

It was just a really nice day and enjoyable day for the students, a busy day where people came in and spoke on truth. The world has their view on what’s good for you, and what you should be allowed or not allowed to do. For us, the truth is God’s word, so we would go to God’s word and see what he teaches us. So, this
conference was, specifically, “In a sexualized society, what does God say in that regard?”

The community is not “the world” in this case, or people who believe differently than what is in scripture. Who is part of the community and who is not part of the community can be found by examining her words a little more carefully, especially the pronouns. For instance, “The world has their view … For us the truth is in God’s word, so we would go to God’s word and see what he teaches us.” This example was chosen because it shows how deeply Candice recognizes her community. She is speaking freely about something that happened at the school, and in her conversation, she builds up a distinction between what is considered part of her community and what is not part of it.

Others were much more direct. Devon and Kathryn both defined ‘community’ as the, “church community” when asked. All the others used, “church community” and, “supporting community”, or just, “community” interchangeably. At no time do those interviewed speak of ‘community’ in the sense of neighbourhood or surrounding area. It is always defined by church, by those who share a unity of faith and a unity of purpose for the school.

Why is This Community Important?

This unity of purpose is clearly seen in other ways, too, and this begins to answer the question of why community is so important. Gary tells a story about how, at the elementary school, a group of parents saw the need for the school to support families from the church community who had children with special needs. These were children with exceptionalities that made it difficult to place them inside a regular classroom, even with extra support. Seeing this need, the parents put together a proposal that would see
the church communities invest in a new wing for the school that would have, among other things, a double classroom sized space that would be equipped for working with students that had been designated as, “special needs” inside the church community. Gary also points out that the parents who started the proposal were not all parents of children with exceptionalities that needed a specialized program to be enrolled at the school. He said, “One … child was integrated into the classroom. This child’s needs were not as great as some of the other children.” This person was involved more to help others from the community in planning and proposing the new program.

Richard reflects on this story during his interview, as well. He speaks about the beauty of building the wing. He said,

The spirit of working together was so neat. To walk through the school as they are finishing the building, with an open house to show it off. There were so many members walking through the building you really get a sense of community. You have grandparents … walking through the school saying, “Wow, this is amazing, I really like what I see.” It does your heart good, though it is not something that you do by yourself. As a community you feel connected to it.

That connected feeling is another expression of community; it is also expressed by other interviewees, but in different ways. Devon and Marinus express the connection by describing the unity of purpose that they see between the church, the home, and the school. Rachelle, Candice, and Kathryn see the connection because the school’s values align with their own and the faith that the church community holds together. Peter and Gary, as Principals, both see the unity of purpose in the members that make up the leadership in the school. Peter, who notes that the high school’s Education Committee
needs both rural and urban representatives because they have different perspectives, also speaks about how important it is to the whole community that a Christian perspective is infused into every aspect of the school. He says, “[The parents] know the importance of what we are doing here as well; training covenant children.” Here again, one sees the reference back to the promises that parents made when their children were baptized as infants; it is the overarching glue that binds the school’s community together.

The Community and Involvement

One thing each of the parent interviewees had in common was they were busy people. All but one was working outside the home full-time as well as being a parent, a spouse, and an active member of their local church community. The one who was not working at a job outside the home was working with her husband to raise seven children. They are all busy people, and the work for the school takes time. Both Chairmen figured that they spent about 20 hours a week on school-related work and the members of the Education Committee are at the school regularly for classroom visits, assemblies and just touching base with teachers, for example. Moreover, Blake’s work on the Transportation Committee at the elementary school takes up 2 to 3 hours a week in a slow time, and that does not include the time it takes to prepare for Board meetings and Finance Committee meetings. Marinus states that he is at the school around 5 hours a month, and that does not include the work that he does for the school at home. In all cases, being in a leadership role in the school takes time – time that, to those looking from the outside in, these people do not have.

When asked why they were involved in the school, every interviewee answered that they were asked to be by a member of the school’s community. They were all asked
if they would let their name stand, and they all said yes. Why? Was there external pressure put on them? Does the church community that they belong to insist that they take leadership positions in the school? When the interviewees spoke about how they were approached by another in their community, each one was asked what would have happened if they declined the opportunity. The answer they all gave was: nothing. No interviewee reported that they were pressured into taking on the role except Devon, who spoke about how he was asked more than once to stand as Chairman. And when asked what would have happened if he had said no in the end, Devon stated what everyone else stated, “They would have moved on to find someone else.” Devon was also asked if the school community would have looked at him differently if he had said no. Even though he was pressured, he did not think so. His rationale for not thinking he would be viewed differently is interesting:

I would say that usually the community is aware of your involvement in things. If I was not involved in anything else – because I believe that beside my work responsibilities, we all should be able to do a little bit of something to give back to the community in general – maybe then they would say, “Well you’re not doing anything, why don’t you take this.” The reality is that usually people who are getting things done are busy (laughs)–and I did have other things … Knowing what was coming up, when I did accept this I did shun all other responsibilities. This is a huge responsibility, and I don’t serve in any other capacity anywhere else in the church community. I shouldn’t say that, I do serve in one other way in the church community. I am very quick to say no to anything extra when people call me up and say can you do this.
What Devon describes is what each of the other interviewees describe: they were all involved in things outside their daily tasks already. Most of the men had leadership roles in the church, on top of heavy work obligations that tied up their time during the week. Both Candice and Rachelle were involved in the school-related roles before serving on the secondary school’s Education Committees. And Kathryn stated that up until this point in her life, she was too busy with her family to take on the role, but her husband was involved on the Board and she went to meetings and was involved as much as she could be. They were busy people. So, what made them let their names stand for these positions?

The answer is surprisingly simple. They wanted to do the work, and the school provided them with the opportunity to do it. They all report, like Devon says above, that they see serving in a leadership position at their schools as giving back. There are other motivations, as well, but each person mentioned that giving back to the community was an important influencer when they made the decision.

**Parental Governance and Involvement with Children’s Education**

Schools are about children and education. In the end, the decisions that parents make to send their children to a school where parents are chiefly responsible for the good governance of the institution must have some benefit. This section will explore those benefits by first understanding the financial cost of sending children to a Canadian Reformed school. Then, it will look explore the basis upon which parents made the decision to become involved in the leadership in their school. Once the basis is described, the study will turn to the matter of the benefit that parents see to being involved. It will
end by examining how being in a governance position impacts future relationships with the school.

The Cost

The schools described in this study are private schools in the province on Ontario. Being in the province of Ontario means that the parents who send their children to these schools are paying for that privilege. In the 2017-18 school year, this meant a yearly cost of $8,400 per family at the elementary school involved in this study, regardless of how many children per family were attending. In the secondary school involved in this study, a family will spend $7,044 per year if they also have children attending a Canadian Reformed elementary school, and $10,272 if they only have children at the high school level (again, regardless of how many children they have in the school). In addition to the parents paying tuition, there is also a large support base for these schools from within the Canadian Reformed church community. Gary reports that there are many members of the elementary school society who do not have children in the school. Both Board Chairmen speak about this additional support, and Richard himself is a grandparent whose children have graduated out of both schools. Approximately 30% of each school’s budget is made up from money these members and others’ donations. This number may be an expression of how much the school means to the members of the Canadian Reformed churches even when they do not have children in the school.

Because parents are paying for their children’s education directly, in addition to supporting Ontario’s public or separate education system through their taxes, one could say that they are already more directly engaged in their child’s education than many other parents in Ontario. When a substantial amount of money comes out of one’s accounts
every month so that one’s children can attend the school of one’s own choice, one would suspect that the topic of money would be prevalent in the interviews. Interestingly, though, only Kathryn brought up money. She said:

Because I belong to the church community, that is why I send my kids to that particular Christian school. And because you have to pay all that tuition, as a parent you do feel very involved. It is close to your heart, and you are passionate about this, or you would not take on the financial burden to send your children to a school that is not funded at all by our government. … I think it is important to be able to contribute where you can, and most parents do want to if they are able to.

It is important to note that Kathryn was the only interviewee that spoke about the financial obligation that her family had, but for her, the most important factor was that the school aligned with her belief system. When others spoke of money, it was in terms of how the Board needs to be responsible with it (Peter), how as a Treasurer in the school, you learn a lot about it (Richard), or how as part of the work that you do on a Finance Committee, you have to collect it (Blake). No interviewee complained about having to pay it to the school, and no one, not even Kathryn, used the money it costs to send children to a Canadian Reformed school as the basis of being involved in their child’s (or grandchild’s) school.

**The Basis for Involvement**

When it comes to the basis for their being involved in the governance of the school, as noted above, each parent interviewed was asked to join the Board or Education Committee by another person in the school’s community; they did not seek out the
position themselves, nor did they campaign for it. Only the two Chairmen, Richard and Devon, had ever held School Board positions before, and only Rachelle had any experience in the field of education. The rest of the participants came to their leadership positions with only the backgrounds that they picked up through their daily work and the business of parenting. They were asked if they would be willing to let their names stand for the roles, and they acquiesced. Their link to the Canadian Reformed churches, their membership in the school society, and the fact that they were asked to be involved formed their basis for sitting on the Board or in the Education Committee. When Peter was asked what he thought about this lack of formal training and education from an educator’s standpoint, he described the following:

Individual members have expressed a real lack in being able to do their work. They come in very nervous about doing these teacher visits. They say, “I’m no teacher, I can’t go in and evaluate that teacher!” And we say, “It’s OK you’re not! No problem, we don’t want you to do that. We want you to get a feel for what is going on in the school. We want you to be a sounding Board for us, be a representative of the community.” They don’t think that they need to be the educational leaders in the school. That is the admin’s job.

Gary expresses something similar when he states,

You want people on the Board who have good vision, who understand what it means to have a Canadian Reformed school. Who will promote the school? So, you are looking for those people who have those skill sets and interests, and who could carry that forward.
These comments about the qualifications needed to be on the Board and Education Committee demonstrate that the basis for involvement is not a skill set in education. A skill set in education is in the school already with the Principals and teachers; so, rather, the parental leadership is there to bring a depth of community understanding to the Board. This depth of community understanding is important to the parents involved, and it is important to the Principals involved, too.

**The Benefit of Being Involved**

If financial obligation already indicates engagement, as mentioned above, and the basis for being in a leadership position comes from nothing more than a willingness to stand for the position when someone asks you to, the remaining question is: what benefit do parents see to being involved with the school? Looking at the transcripts, when parents were asked about the benefit from being involved in the leadership of the school, three major themes seem to emerge. The first theme is parents benefit from their expanded access to the Principal. Secondly, parents benefit from expanded access to the teachers in the school, and finally, parents benefit from a deeper knowledge of what it takes to run a school. This section will finish with the presence of unexpected findings.

**Access to the Principal.** As mentioned in an earlier section, the Principal is seen by the Board and Education Committee members as the face of the school to the community. Peter said that for him to play the role well, the Principal needs to be, “in tune with the community”, and the community needs to know and understand the Principal. Both Gary and Peter state that they gain this knowledge through the parents that they interact with in the school’s Board and Education Committees. When reflecting on the challenges that the secondary school had in the past, Devon said that one of the
causes was the Principal at the time. He stated that there was, a “connectivity issue there, so things fell a little bit to the wayside.”

Candice expressed her appreciation for the work that a Principal does because her work on the Education Committee put her into close contact with the Principal and she now, “better understands what he does.” When speaking about the Principal, Rachelle mentioned that he was, “very accessible.” Marinus speaks about how accessible the Principal is, too, when he states that between working with parents in school operations (like Blake’s Transportation Committee) and parents in school governance (like being a Board member), the Principal interacts with a lot of parents in many different situations and gets to know them well. Kathryn remembers when she was a young parent and not as familiar with the school. She says that her interaction with the Principal through the work on the Board has, “made her feel more involved.” It had an impact on her willingness to approach him and increased her knowledge of how the school runs.

**Access to teachers.** It was not only the Principal that parents in leadership positions appreciated. Even more comments were made about the increased, and increasingly valuable, interaction that parents had with the teachers. Rachelle based her willingness to be involved on increased access to the school staff. She said, “I wanted to know the school, I wanted to know the teachers, I wanted them to be comfortable both ways, me comfortable with them, and them comfortable with me, saying whatever they wanted to say.” She also used her ease of access to teachers as a method of obtaining spare textbooks for her child. With these books, she removed the excuse of, “I forgot my books at school!” from her son. She was unsure whether she would have been as quick to
request the books if she was not already familiar with the school and the teachers that worked there.

In both study schools, parents are involved with teachers right from the beginning of the teacher’s time with the school. Both Board Chairmen and all the parents involved with the Education Committees and the Human Resource Committees spoke about how they were involved in hiring the staff that served at a school: they were there for the interviews, they discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the applications, and they alone made the decision to hire, or not, because only parents are able to cast a vote. Right from the beginning, then, there is a very real relationship between the parents in these positions and the staff.

During the year, parents also visit classrooms on a regular basis. In the elementary school, from both the Board and the Education Committee will join a class for a few lessons twice a year. At the secondary school, where only the Education Committee members visit, each teacher will receive a visit on a two-year cycle. There is evidence in the transcripts that both parents and teachers are uncomfortable with the visits at times. Parents were uncomfortable because they feel they do not have the skill to see what is happening in a classroom, and consequently feel inadequate to the task. Gary points this feeling out, too, when he speaks about the parents when they start on the Board or on a committee. He claims that they have, “enthusiasm 100%, knowledge about how it all works, not necessarily.” Both Peter and Rachelle speak about teachers being a little reluctant to have parents in their classrooms because the teachers feel that parents really do not know the extent of the work that they do. Rachelle states, “some (teachers) still see parents (visiting the school) as if it is a waste of time having the mom there because they
do not know about education.” Overall, though, both Peter and Rachelle agree that this sentiment fades from the teachers as parents become more involved and get to know the teachers better. The sentiment of not knowing much about the school also fades from the parents as time goes on, and the purpose of the parental visit is better understood. As Peter states,

[Parents] know the importance of what we are doing here as well; training covenant children. So, just the weight of what goes on here, I think they recognize that decisions they make can have lasting effects on the quality of education we have here, and the affordability of the education we have here. Those two things, I think weigh pretty heavily.

The purpose of the parent visit is to get to know the school and to get to know the teacher, and it seems to work well. Blake speaks about how he, “is always interested” and that he has a shared sense of purpose with the staff when he visits his daughter’s classroom. Candice speaks about the impact that having increasingly open relationships with teachers has had:

I think in a lot of ways it is a matter of, if you are not sure about something, you’re not as quick, you’re going to be as quick to approach anybody about it if you don’t know them very well. So, because I know the school, the staff, I think it opened my eyes to the fact that if there is anything going on, if it is positive or negative, it is important to approach somebody about it, because if it is a negative thing and you don’t deal with it, that festers and it is better just to get it out and to know what really happened, let’s say. If there was a concern, then often that resolves it. And just a reminder to me to always give encouragement [even] if I’m
not on the School Board or the Education Committee, because, yes, the teachers
play such a huge role in our children’s lives. To show that thanks to them and to
give them encouragement when you can … So, I think that really is what helped
me to see that, [was] serving on the committees that I have.

Kathryn, too, speaks about how the visits have made her more comfortable,
though she also felt that she was comfortable before she was on the Board. Richard, who
is a grandparent that serves on the School Board, speaks about how much more
accessible a teacher is once one has done a few classroom visits. He even goes as far as to
say that this increased knowledge about what teachers do influences discussions
surrounding remuneration and benefits. In the school, what teachers are paid is controlled
by parents, as well, though remuneration and benefits are system-wide and not
individualized by school. Instead, they are controlled by an outside organization called
the League of Canadian Reformed School Societies.

An unexpected finding. The participants were all asked about student
ingagement, as well. Did they feel that their children’s engagement with their own
education changed, either with better marks or a better attitude? The answer was simply:
no. Neither the parents nor the Principal noted a measurable shift in the educational
engagement of the children of those in leadership positions. When asked about whether
her children were more engaged in their school work since she was on the Board,
Kathryn stated, “No, it has probably been about the same. Some kids are more on top of
things and more engaged, and some would rather watch TV.” Being on the Board was
thus not a solution to her children’s lack of engagement. Rachelle talks a fair bit about
her youngest son who needs more help in school. While she did say that being involved
in the school gave her better access to her child’s teacher, she feels that she would have made an opportunity to get to know those teachers anyway. Richard’s experience was the same, as was the experience of Devon, Blake, and Marinus; they did not notice that their children were any more, or any less, engaged in school.

Looking at the engagement of the children of parents who are in leadership positions from the Principal’s side of the equation, Gary and Peter did not notice that children were more engaged either. They both mention that they had never thought about parental engagement in that way before. Gary did have some examples of children acknowledging their parent’s role. A child in Grade One once told him that, “My dad is your boss!”, and another Board member’s child told him that she was in the school on Saturday with her mom and her siblings to hang posters by the water fountains and taps. Peter’s experience is much the same; he mentions a child in the school who is a, “real live-wire in the hallways and in class,” and notes that his father being on the Board executive has not changed him a bit. These observations seem to be contrary to other research, and the finding that their children’s interest in school has not changed as a consequence of their involvement will be among the items examined in the next section of this study.

**Future Engagement with the School**

Each of the parent participants in this study was asked how they thought that their involvement in the school would change once they retired from their position – and if they thought it would, at all. Devon spoke about the change in time commitment, but that he still plans to be involved as a parent and a community member. Rachelle noted that she saw how involvement shifts when she was off the Education Committee from her
church community’s elementary school (a different one from this study). She said that her interest was high, but her knowledge level was slowly diminishing because she was no longer active in the school. She expects that the same will happen when she is finished with her work in the secondary school. Kathryn, too, feels that it will change because she will not have the same opportunity to contribute. Candice thinks it will change, too; she feels that she will have less of a voice, so there will be less incentive to be involved. She also feels that she will be more involved than before because she has a better understanding of what is happening behind the scenes. Marinus echoes this statement when he says,

I think I am going to be very engaged in monitoring the progress of the school. … When you leave you have a more critical eye toward those who have assumed your position. That is something that you need to be very cognizant of. You can’t think that you know better than who is there and come back to hold the new members’ feet to the fire. I think what you can do when you leave is certainly share your experiences with others. What worked, what the challenges are, what did not work. You can support the society because you have the benefit of that knowledge and the experience. You can support the society in other ways. It might even be in attending a membership meeting and contributing to discussions around new challenges and issues that are faced to the current Board, relative to your experience and sharing that historical knowledge in that context. That might help the individuals in the new Board to move forward.

A continued sense of engagement is also the experience of Richard, who remained interested in the school decades after he served in the Board. This interest was
still strong enough for him to pull Board members aside when he was puzzled by a decision made at the school. Further, he allowed his name to stand for Chairman of the Board long after all his children were graduated from the school – his history in the leadership of the school kept him engaged and all the others feel it will, too.

Overall, the interviews with the participants in this study have made many observations that are related to the themes developed in the literature. The literature showed that schools do not operate in a vacuum, as they work with parents to bring a student on a journey from childhood to adulthood. The next section will work to discuss the findings of this study alongside the themes found in the literature; that is, that there are many factors that influence how well the school accomplishes its goal, and many challenges that the school faces along the journey. There are pressures from the School Board, pressures from the school personnel, pressures from the community, pressures from the parents, and impacts on students as mentioned above.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The interviews that were discussed in the fourth chapter of this paper outlined many of the same points about parental leadership in education that were discussed in the literature review. This chapter will compare the findings from these interviews with the literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two. This comparison will be done using the framework which considers that there are multiple factors that work together to support the school in its task of educating students as they move from childhood to adulthood; each of these supports are strengthened with the increase of parental engagement with the school. In particular, these supports are strengthened especially when designing a school system where parents have the final say on all matters of governance, which in turn, has an impact on parental engagement.

Parental Leadership by Design

The participants who took part in this study serve in schools that are designed to be run by parents and for parents. The people who set up the school wanted an institution that had strong connections between what happened at home and what happened at school. Parents (and grandparents) sit on the School Board, and they are the central office making the final decisions about budgets, policy, and curriculum. Because the founders of the school designed this strong line of responsibility back to the parents of the students, the participants spoke about authority in the school and the policy by which the school is governed in a way that was different from the way it was written about in the literature surrounding this topic. This difference can be seen by looking at the authority parents had in the school and the policy that was developed to support this authority. Both pieces impacted parental involvement and how the school was supported by it.
Authority

The literature surrounding parental involvement in schools supports the notion that when institutions work to get parents more involved, the school is affected in a positive way (Goodall & Ghent, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Henderson et al., 2007; Howland et al., 2006; LaRocque et al., 2011; Pushor, 2017; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). In the literature, either the school district, the School Board, or the school Principal opened doors for parent involvement. The studies often looked at what the school was like before the school welcomed parents, and how welcoming parents in has changed the school. Because the parents were invited in, one could look at it as if they were guests in the system; for instance, parents are guests who are given freedom to move in certain areas of the school, but who were kindly asked to stay out of others. Pushor (2007) explains these typical schemes for getting parents involved in the school using colonial language. Using this concept, Pushor looks at the school – meaning its leaders, structures, and policies – as if they were colonizers. Colonizers are people with strength, and they move in to protect those without strength: the colonized. Once the system is set up, those with the authority work hard to convince those without authority that the current way of doing things is the only proper way.

Using Pushor’s (2007) metaphor, the typical school authority – Board, Principal, and teacher – has positioned itself as knowing more about educating children than the typical parent. Therefore, policy reinforces practice and acts as barrier that prevents parents from having authority in the school beyond what is hesitantly doled out by those in power. Even when the parental role is recognized as being important in official documents, there are strict limits placed on the actual voice that parents have. In Ontario,
parent engagement in practice means that parents are called to help their children with homework and volunteering at the school (OME, 2010). Ontario also speaks about parent voice, but as has been mentioned in the second chapter, this voice comes with no say – the parent voice is not the voice of authority in the typical school.

The sense of authority that parents have in the schools involved in this study is quite different. Parents spoke about how they were responsible for writing policy, hiring staff, and working with the Principal and staff to set curriculum. They spoke about how comfortable they were in the school; they were not the guests there, they were the owners. As owners, and within the limits that were set by the policies they made, they felt comfortable with their authority and used it as a strong support line for the school.

Policy

The school authorities involved in the literature listed above act as protectors of people who are perceived as weak. These school authorities use their position of power to guide and control access to student learning and school policy under the guise that school authorities know most about the best interest of the students under their care; that is not to say that it would not be the case sometimes, but it is not the case at all times. Parents are asked to help, parents are asked to volunteer, and parents are asked to speak up, but unlike the parents interviewed in this study, they are not mandated by policy to lead.

Mapp (2003) describes a school where parents and teachers shared decision-making power and authority with teachers, and the Principal acted only as advisor. Though this situation seems similar to the authority structure found in the schools involved in this study, here, too, the leadership role was a gift from the Principal; the authority was not in the parent’s hands by right of policy.
The policy surrounding who has authority in the schools involved in the literature review is in stark contrast to the parental involvement that was described by the participants in this study. When the participants spoke about making decisions, it was the policy that the Principal did not get to vote. This decision was made intentionally by the parents who founded the school. The founding parents felt that the school should reflect a parental vision for education that was in line with their world view and their cultural beliefs. The Principal has a role, but it is to support and advise, not to dictate. To continue the colonial metaphor, the way parents choose to engage in their child’s education in an authentic way was to self-govern the education that their children received. When they started the school, it was a quiet revolution against the available public education system. The worldview that the education in the public schools was taught from did not match their own. As a result, they worked within the means given to them by the Education Act to start a private school. It was a school that fit the founding parent’s worldview and religious belief – a school that was as far removed from the control of the governing authorities as possible. As can been seen in the schools’ foundational documents, parents embedded their authority in policy, and the school system, unlike many quiet revolutions, did not fall apart after a short time. Both schools in this study have been successfully supported by the parents over multiple decades and multiple generations.

**Authentic Parental Engagement**

The data also revealed that both the parents and the Principals interviewed understood that parents held the real power in the school. The Principals were considered expert advisors by the parents, and both Principals were consulted heavily. All the people interviewed stated that Principals had influence, but all acknowledged that Principals had
no vote when decisions were made – the Principals were the guests at the Board and Education Committee table.

The participants described how the Principal and the parents in the Board and committees worked together in a comfortable, very natural way. The importance of the parents and the Principal being naturally comfortable is reflected in the literature. Pushor (2007) describes how parents who are truly engaged in their children’s education become partners with the school. She speaks about how parental knowledge and teacher knowledge combine to provide a powerful learning experience in schools. The way Rachelle described the secondary school’s conference about truth in the interview shows this partnership and sharing of knowledge in action. Rachelle spoke about how the conference was initiated by the staff who know the needs of the student body well. At the same time, the Education Committee and the School Board – both parent controlled – were asked to support the conference, and without their approval, it would not have happened. Devon spoke about this conference as well, and mentioned how he worked with the staff during the planning stages by offering suggestions and encouragement. This blending of knowledge shows how parents engaged in the activities in the school in an authentic way. It also shows that parents are willing to listen and respond to what they hear from the staff in the school in a way that upholds the purpose of the institution. These parents could be considered authentic partners in the school according to Pushor’s (2017) definition. The parents combined their knowledge with that of the staff of the school to create something meaningful for the students.
Parent Engagement and Impact on Students’ Achievement and Wellbeing

One of the benefits purported by the literature surrounding parental engagement is student achievement (Epstein, 2010; Gonzalez-deHass & Willems, 2003; Heinrichs, 2018; Keyes & Gregg, 2001; LaRocque et al., 2011; Mapp, 2003; OME, 2012; Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2012; Pushor, 2017; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). The studies on parental engagement found that in schools where parental engagement with education increased, students tended to do better. This outcome of having students do better in school was a key reason for getting parents involved in the school and adding a parental line to the other support lines that hold up the school. The stories told by the participants in this study, however, gave different reasons for wanting to be involved.

The parents involved in this study were all asked whether they felt that their children were doing better in school now that they were heavily involved. Only two mentioned that it may have made a difference because their children needed a little extra help. The improvement came from the parents having the comfort level to approach the teachers at the school. While being more comfortable points to an increased level of social capital, the extra contact may have happened regardless of being on the school’s Board or Education Committee. When the two participants who stated that their children were doing better in school were asked whether they would have contacted their child’s teacher regardless, both answered that they likely would have.

Many of the parents and the Principals said that parental engagement in the governance at the school made little difference in the children of Board members in terms of academic performance or behaviour. That being stated, Gary, the Principal of the elementary school, noted that children were aware of the roles that their parents had in
the school, and they commented on it to him. Marinus, too, mentions how his child told
the Principal that her dad was his boss. A child saying that shows that there is an
awareness there on the part of the children, and it may affect a child’s attitude toward
school even if it is not obvious to those involved. This awareness may be because the
involvement of the parent with the school is not new to the family, neither is a parent
involved in a leadership position for a short time during which a difference could be
marked. Board and Education Committee terms span 3 to 6 years, which translates to a
large percentage of a child’s career at an elementary school. In fact, Marinus answered
the question about whether his involvement made an impact on his children at school in
that way; he said, “They have never really known any different.” At the high school, a
child may have a parent involved in the leadership at the school for the child’s entire
educational career. Being involved in the school for so long makes the engagement of the
parent with the school a natural state for the child. It is authentic engagement, too, since
the parent is there to fulfill a specific role that has always been there in the history of the
school. Thus, it is a strong support for the school as it fulfills its purpose.

There may also be an aspect of community involvement in the lack of a
demonstrable change in the way that children of parents in the schools’ Boards and
Education Committees engaged in their education. The parents in this study spoke often
about how their entire church community was involved in the school. This church
community is also the community that the children in the school belong to. Research has
shown that when parents and community members constantly reinforce the message that
education is important, student performance improves (Epstein, 2010; Epstein et al.,
2002; Hands, 2008). It could be supposed, then, that being surrounded by people
interested in the school at home and at church also has a constant influence for maximum engagement. Thus, when their parents join the school’s leadership, there is little or no change in the level of importance that the school has in the lives of the children. This lack of change in terms of the parents’ involvement, in turn, leads to little to no change in the children’s engagement with their learning.

**Authentic Roles**

The data that came from the interviews also revealed interesting information about the importance of the roles parents are playing in the school. Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) studied parental roles and divided the roles between two types: school-based and home-based. School-based roles centred on parents coming to the school to interact. This type of interaction would involve parents attending school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering. Pomerantz et al. (2007) also state that being involved in the School Board is part of school-based involvement, but that its affect on students is likely small because of the limited number of parents involved. The second role with the school is home-based. In the home-based role, the parents are involved with their children’s education through helping with homework, helping with course selection, reading to their child, and just generally taking an interest in what is going on in the school. Pomerantz et al. (2007) have found that both roles have a positive impact parental involvement and on children at school. However, the activities that are part of the home-based involvement has a more positive correlation with increased student performance.

The parents in this study, and the Principals as well, report little to no change in the achievement or behaviour of the children whose parents are involved in the
governance of the school. It leaves one wondering: why? The answer to the question may come from the fact that the parents were never not involved in the school. The schools that agreed to participate in this study are private institutions; they are set up for parents, by parents, with the purpose of educating children under a specific religious vision. There is also a financial commitment to sending children there. Kathryn mentions the commitment in relation to the money that the family must pay. She states that one of her rationales for being involved was paying for her child’s education, and she wanted to be informed. However, it is more than just the money: there is a tangible love for the school that came out in the interviews. Blake stated, for instance, that he just loves to be involved and made sure he was involved even before he was asked to be on the Board.

Pomerantz et al. (2007) also make note of inconsistencies in the research surrounding the effect of parental involvement on their children’s education and student performance. Sometimes, they note that performance improves, while sometimes, research states there is little change, and other times, they note negative effects on student performance when parental engagement increases. In their research, Pomerantz et al. (2007) find that the focus and type of parental involvement makes the difference. When the focus of the involvement is, “autonomy supportive, process focused, characterized by positive affect, or accompanied by positive beliefs” (p. 188), it generally had a positive effect. The data from the interviews shows that the parents involved in this study were already positive about the school and education in general before they took on leadership positions. This positive attitude did not change once they took on leadership roles. It is possible, then, that this lack of change in perspective towards the school resulted in the lack of change in their children’s engagement at school.
Authentic Engagement

Gonzalea-deHaas and Willems (2003) state that one of the problems with getting parents involved in schools stems from the fact that parents, especially immigrant parents, do not have a history in which they have been involved setting up schools. The opposite is true for the parents interviewed for this study, as has been seen in the data collected. Parents who send their children to these Canadian Reformed schools have a long history of being involved in the school. They are involved not only as parents, but as members of their church community. The importance of this involvement was seen when the participants spoke about who were members of the school society. It was also seen in the fact that both school’s count on close to 30% of their operating budget coming from members of the school society who are not parents. This number, according to Richard, does not include other fundraisers or money drives. There is a sense of ownership, then, that comes out of the data that was reviewed. The parents involved in the school are not second-class citizens, invited to a party where those in power feel they do not really belong. The parents report that when they first start in their positions, they are nervous and feel ill-equipped for the task they have been asked to do. They are not the first to be involved, though; there are other parents on the Board and Education Committees that have done the work before. Soon after they begin their work in the school, they speak with confidence about their role and the work they do. Those interviewed also report that they grow into the job, and the Principals confirm the truth of their thoughts.

It is important to note, then, that the student benefit of having their parents involved in the school cannot be considered outside of the knowledge that the parents already felt engaged before they took on the role. Moving from being a parent in the
school to a parent leader in the school was a natural progression. The authority they hold is not a gift from a higher power, or a privilege that could be taken away when the person in the Principal’s office changes. It is theirs by choice, by policy, and by practice. It is an authentic extension of their role as parents as they work to educate their children. It is also a strong line that binds the school to the parents.

**Empowered Parental Engagement**

Empowerment was defined above as giving official authority or legal power to a person. Empowerment, as a concept, emerged in the interviews, and in the subsequent study of the by-laws of the schools involved, too. It was shown that parents have the official and the legal power to lead in the schools where their children attend. Being required to lead means that they can make the decisions. Though they rely on the teachers and the Principal of the school as expert advisors, the Principal and teachers are no more than that.

This cooperation between the Principal and the parents at a school was also highlighted in the literature. When explaining the success of parental engagement, both Bryk (2010) and Beck and Murphy (1998) stated that it was due to the Principal and staff treating parents as full-fledged partners in the school. The data collected for this study shows a partnership between parents and the school is also possible when the school is parent-run by design. Partnerships have conflicts at times, and these schools were no exception. Interviewed parents in both the secondary school and the elementary school spoke of conflict between the Principal and the parents on the Board.

At the elementary school, all the interviewees stated that the relationship with the current Principal was harmonious. Everyone was working together to make the school a
good place for students to learn. However, Richard mentions that in his experience with a different Principal several decades in the past, things were not always so smooth. He stated that the Principal at the time was difficult for parents to work with, and the parents on the Board lacked the skills to deal with it. The challenge was not with the style of governance, but more the experience of the people in the positions of power. Goldring (1993) writes about how Principals in most schools are considered middle managers; they are positioned between their administrative superiors and their parent clientele. This middle management, “places Principals in pivotal positions of developing varied coalitions and negotiating with role partners to balance delicate relationships” (Goldring, 1993, p. 96). The schools involved in this study place the Principal in a different type of middle management role. The parent clientele are also the Principal’s administrative superiors. The data from the interviews shows, though, that the Principal is still responsible for managing delicate relationships. Being the chief advisor to the Board and Education Committee, acting as the gatekeeper between the School Board and the teaching staff, and working to ensure that the school is meeting the broader community needs are all tasks that the Principal is given the responsibility to achieve.

When working with parents, Goldring (1993) states that Principals do well to employ three engagement strategies: socialization, cooperation, and formalization. While Goldring was writing about schools where parents were clients and others held the decision-making power, the strategies she cites are evidenced in the schools in this study, as well. Socialization, according to Goldring (1993), is managing the expectations of the parents about what the school can provide. When Peter and Gary speak about the work they do with the Board and Education Committee, they often refer to parental and
community expectations. *Cooperation*, according to Goldring (1993), happens when the Principal and the parents work together to share a common goal. This type of common goal was also evidenced in the data from the interviews. All parties spoke about working together to come to consensus around various goals. The aim of reaching consensus also seemed to function well. Lastly, *formalization* was also evident in the data; this, Goldring states, happens when, “Principals try to routinize parental involvement in to predictable forms of participation” (1993, p. 97). The data shows that formalization happens in the schools involved in this study. For instance, there are rules and policies in place that govern how and when parents can get involved. As Peter points out, the parents on the Board and Education Committee have their roles, and the Principal has his; the roles are well-defined.

Peter speaks about the importance of working with the parents in the Board and Education Committee, as well. When discussing the parents who get to be on the Board, he mentions that there was a time, after a strong Principal retired, when parents came on the Board because they wanted to take the reigns back from the Principal. Peter mentions that in the end, the by-laws that govern the school and the policies that are in place were used to dispel the tension. The by-laws and policies spell out the roles that parents have, the role that the Principal has, and what could be a volatile situation smooths itself out.

In the literature reviewed, the Principal was typically the person in the relationship with the parents that held the real power in the school. Principals are increasingly challenged to bridge the gap between themselves and the parents involved in the school. In her study on increasing the partnership between parents and the Principal of urban schools in Las Angeles, Auerbach (2010) challenges Principals to provide
leadership for authentic partnerships. Auerbach (2010) writes that authentic partnerships, “assume broader goals … and cultural responsiveness. It is a reciprocal empowerment model, with families and educators co-constructing roles and engaging in dialogue and mutual learning” (p. 375). In the schools involved in this study, one can see the same partnerships being developed even though the parents are the ones in the power positions. The data shows that parents and Principal share decision-making, they share culture, and they work at learning together. For example, Gary readily admits that he looks at his leadership in the school as a form of service. Perhaps in the system being studied, it is easier for parents to have an authentic partnership with the Principal than it would be in a school where the parents have no decision-making power. After all, a Principal can operate a school without inviting parents in, but it would be much more difficult for parents to operate a school while ignoring the person they have hired to manage it. In the end, the partnership between parents and the Principal and staff that Bryk (2010) and Beck and Murphey (1998) speak about finds its own balance. Finding this balance seems to be due, to a large extent, to the fact that the parents are empowered in their positions. They have a vested interest in making sure that the school is effectively run by the Principal and staff they hire. After all, as mentioned by every parent interviewed, the school is there for the benefit of their own children, and the parents are there to support the school.

It should be noted that both Richard and Peter mentioned that the relationship between the Principal and the parents in the School Board was not always smooth. Richard speaks about it directly, and Peter hinted at it. Few details were given beyond the fact that the relationship between the Principal and the parents on the Board broke down,
and that the Principal in question was no longer with the school. The lack of detail means that one cannot draw conclusions about what exactly happened. It is possible that a Principal could be dismissed based on these broken relationships rather than his inability to run a school well. Without further details, however, it is hard to understand what led to the issues they spoke about, or even how the issues were ultimately resolved. There is enough evidence, though, to state that having parents in positions of authority in the school does not guarantee solid partnerships between the Principal and the parents. There is also enough evidence to say that the partnerships that the schools were experiencing during the study were working well.

**Empowerment and Types of Caring Engagement**

Epstein (2010) writes about how schools should be working to draw parents in. She points out that for parental engagement to prosper in the school, the school should support six different types of parental involvement, “and the integration of all family and community connections within a single unified plan and program” (p. 89). In the literature review, it was mentioned that the fifth and sixth type, parental decision-making and community involvement, would receive the most attention. Given that those involved in this study often spoke about the unified vision that parents, teachers, and the community had for the school, more than just the fifth and sixth type of involvement came to the fore. Because they were more present in the data than expected, it would be advantageous to look for evidence of all of Epstein’s (2010) involvement types as they were presented in the data.

Epstein’s (2010) first type involves parenting which, in this case, means that the school will work to help families support children as children. No interviewee spoke
about the school helping with parent education, or assisting families with health, nutrition, and the like. There may be many reasons for school being less involved in assisting families, including the typical socio-economic status of those sending their children to the school. It may also be the strong ties the parents have to a social institution such as a church, which could help families in need, as well. If parenting support is needed by the families that send children to these schools, they have other means of attaining it than relying on the school for help. However, Epstein (2010) also mentions that when schools focus on parenting, they need to, “help families understand schools, and schools understand families” (p. 85). This understanding is demonstrated in the data. All those interviewed mentioned the increased reciprocal knowledge that was gained between the home and the school because of the involvement of parents in governance positions. The parents interviewed claimed increased awareness of what goes on behind the scenes at the school. Conversely, the Principals stated that they know the community better and are aware of the differences in thought and opinion from one sector of the community to the other, like the urban/rural divide at the high school, for instance.

The second type of involvement Epstein (2010) describes involves how the school communicates with parents. When good communication was the focus of a school, it resulted in parents understanding school programs and policy, understanding their own child’s progress at school, being able to respond effectively to student problems, and increased ease in interacting with the school and the teachers. While those interviewed did not dwell on communication with the school, there were examples that show the results Epstein (2010) writes about. Parents spoke about how they were comfortable in the school, for instance. They spoke about how, even years after being in the Board, they
read the school newsletters with interest and understanding. Parents spoke about how they were unafraid to speak up when they saw things they did not understand. The Principals’ answers mirrored Epstein’s (2010) results, too. A level of comfort with the entire community was illustrated by the ease with which Principals were able to describe and understand the parent communities’ needs over a diverse geographic area.

Epstein (2010) makes volunteering her third type of involvement that a school should encourage to increase parent involvement. Each of the Board members and Education Committee members is a volunteer, so one would expect that the results listed by Epstein (2010) for volunteering would mirror what was found in the data. In the interviews, there was evidence that parents were more comfortable in the school after they became involved in a leadership role. They were more self-confident as they worked in the school, and they understood a teacher’s job better as a result of that involvement. They spoke about how they felt welcomed by the school, too, and how their involvement helped them gain access to new skills. The increased comfort level and welcoming feeling are all things that Epstein (2010) also lists as advantages for parents when they volunteer in the school, and they were present in the parents interviewed. In their turn, the administration also mentioned the benefits Epstein (2010) would expect from parents having opportunities to volunteer in the school. They experienced, for instance, a better understanding of the parents in the community by becoming aware of people’s talents and being willing to reach out to all families as potential volunteers.

As was mentioned above, the impact that parental leadership has on students was not as evident in this study as it may have been in others. Epstein (2010) lists learning at home – meaning helping children with homework and teaching them other important
skills – as her fourth type of parental involvement to encourage. Epstein (2010) mentions that one of the results of learning at home was an increased appreciation for teaching skills. The data indicated that one of the results of being involved in the leadership at the school was increased ease of access to the school’s teachers and Principal. This resulted in an increased understanding about the task of the teachers and the Principal as Epstein (2010) described. The increased understanding was represented in the data, though it stemmed from classroom visits that had been made by the parents as opposed to homework help as described by Epstein (2010).

Epstein’s (2010) fifth type of involvement has the attention of the bulk of this paper. It has to do with the effect of allowing parents decision-making power in the school. All the results that Epstein (2010) lists as an advantage to the school are found in the data: there is input into policies and an awareness of them; there is a feeling of ownership in the school; there is an awareness of the parents’ voice in the school; there are shared experiences, and connections with other families evident in the data, as well. The parents involved are not just involved for the benefit of their own children, they are involved for the benefit of all the children who attend: the children of their community.

The sixth type of involvement Epstein (2010) lists as an important result of parental engagement is an increased opportunity to collaborate with the community. While community will be dealt with in more detail in the next section, the interviewees all mentioned the importance of ‘the community’ during the interviews. It plays a very important role in the school and how it operates. The results that Epstein (2010) expects to find in a strong community are present, as well. There is the knowledge and use of local resources, as was seen with the community involvement in the budget. There were
also planned events that involved the whole community in the high school when they had their conference on truth. Additionally, the parents and the Principals interviewed constantly came back to the awareness of the role that the school had in the community, and that the community had in the school. The relationship between the school and the community is important because it speaks to the amount of social capital that exists inside the schools involved in this study. This social capital has been found in other faith-based schools, as well. Coleman (1987) found strong social capital inside Roman Catholic schools in Chicago. Coleman noted that, “the community surrounding the Catholic school, a community created by the church, was of great importance” (p. 36) in setting social norms and expectations about the importance of education. This same sense of the importance of education and social norms is reflected in the data presented in this study of Protestant Christian schools.

Epstein (2010) details a program for educational leaders to get parents more involved in the school. She promotes setting up action groups, outlines different steps for doing so effectively, and details ways that the school can help promote parental involvement. Given the evidence from the interviews conducted in this study, schools that embrace parental leadership can achieve the six types of caring engagement that Epstein (2010) promotes. The Boards and Education Committees are the action teams that Epstein (2010) calls for. They continue to work with the administration for the benefit of their own children and the children of others. Having parents in positions of power increases a parent’s knowledge of the school and their willingness to become involved. And the data shows that care runs deeper than just those involved directly in the school: it runs throughout the entire community involved with the school.
Community and Engagement

The data from the interviews shows that there is a high level of commitment on behalf of the parents to be involved in the school where they send their children. What was surprising about the data was the high level of value that the parents in positions of leadership placed on the community.

In the literature surrounding parental engagement, community is valued highly. Mapp (2003) calls this the, “joining process” (p. 55). In her research on inner-city schools that fostered parental engagement, she notes that the increase in engagement had a lot to do with the schools’ willingness and ability to build a sense of belonging or a sense of community among the parents whose children attend the school. Mapp’s (2003) research shows that the school was able to create the community by welcoming parents, honouring parents, and connecting with parents. Through these processes, the school fostered a community which parents were able to join and feel a sense of belonging in. Pushor (2007) and her vision of familycentric schools is the same: she stresses that schools need to call families in to help them gain a sense of community through the school’s efforts. It is only through the school opening its doors that parent knowledge and teacher knowledge can be shared.

As mentioned above, community and belonging to a community was a major theme in the data that was collected in this study. The strong sense of community in the school is different from other studies because the school is not responsible for creating a community to which parents belong. In the schools involved in this study, the exact opposite happened. The community created a school in which parents not only belong, but play an integral role (Sikkema, 2004; Stoffels, 2012). This concept, and that idea that
playing an integral role may affect parental engagement, was not considered in the review of the literature. Thus, some attention should be given to the research in the sections that follow.

**Ethic of Community**

Furman (2004), working off the research of Robert Starratt, states that educational leadership is fundamentally a moral endeavour and it is therefore governed by ethics. In her review of the literature surrounding this concept, she states that leaders operate under moral and ethical frameworks. The most common ethical frameworks used in the literature are the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, the ethic of care, and the ethic of professionalism. What these ethics mean, according to the literature, are that the most effective schools are schools where those in leadership positions hold not only operational authority, but moral authority. The challenge that Furman (2004) sees with achieving moral authority is,

Little attention is given in the ethics literature to the communal processes that are necessary to achieve the moral purposes of schooling in the twenty-first century. Thus, these ethical frames do little to pull our thinking beyond the mindset, so entrenched in our Western society, our schools, and our field of study, of the individual as “leader’ and moral agent. (p. 220)

As mentioned previously, when gains in parental engagement were made, they were due to the courage and determination of someone who wanted to see it happen. It was a Principal, or Vice-Principal, for the most part. Or, as was the case with SBM schools, it was an experiment by district personnel to see what would happen if parents
had more say. The involvement of the Principal as the sole champion is where Furman (2004) sees the ethic of community having value for educational leadership. She writes,

The ethic of community is useful in mitigating one of the perennial problems of “traditional” research in educational leadership – the unrealistic assumption that “heroic” leaders can provide the vision and expertise to overcome the many challenges facing public schooling in the twenty-first century and lead schools in transformative directions. (p. 222)

Though it was not evident in the data used for this study, many studies about parental engagement say that when parents are more engaged with the school to which their children belong, the children in the school will do better. Though the impact of parental engagement with the school and its impact on student achievement is known, it has been shown that little beyond lip service has been paid to the challenge in most Ontario schools. Yes, parents have councils, yes, parents are consulted, and yes, parents are called a vital partner. The reality is, however, that parents are guests in a realm where many experts feel they have little expertise and, therefore, have little say. You can see this lack of invitation in the recent controversies in Ontario surrounding health education (Ross, 2016) and school closures (Gollom, 2017). In both these instances, parents feel helpless to affect any change because the decisions are made by people outside their community who are in positions which the vast majority cannot attain, such as the Ministry of Education or even the local School Board (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

Furman (2004) states that cultivating an ethic of community can stem that feeling of helplessness. By employing the ethic of community through a democratic community process, Furman (2004) states, an ethic of community can be cultivated in an otherwise
diverse school. Cultivating community would mean developing a process for knowing and understanding, developing a process for full participation, and developing a process for working toward the common good.

While Furman’s (2004) work informs much of the talk about community that was found in the data, it is not a perfect fit. Furman (2004) admits that community needs to be bound around something, and for her, that something is social justice made accessible through, “deep democracy” (p. 229). What “social justice defined through deep democracy” looks like remains elusive and only loosely defined as, “working toward the common good” (p. 229). The recent controversies over school closures and health education in Ontario, for instance, were also matters of the common good, and they were decisions that took place in a democratic society. However, they did not bring unity and community in many places. The data under discussion in this paper shows a different type of community, a community that predates the school. Furman’s (2004) work was all about how to build community, but in this study, the community of the school was already in existence. It did not appear to come into being after the school started, but it was in existence before the decision of putting a shovel into the ground to build a school. It is a preexisting community that includes parents, grandparents, and church members who do not use the school. It is a community that is defined by a tangible purpose; it has norms, it has a sense of right and wrong, and a strong sense of who is inside the community and who is outside. One of the ways that the community is manifested is in the creation of a parent-led school to which all the members of the community are asked to be committed.
This type of committed community is what Strike (2008) promotes. Strike (2008) states that schools do well to be communitarian; that is, they do well to be organizations where individuals find their place in a school by being welcomed into a community to which they can feel that they belong. That same school community is united by something that the people share. This thing that they share could be, “a shared faith, shared values, a shared tradition, a shared identity, common interests, or shared goals” (Strike, 2008, p. 179). The parents and the Principals involved in this study spoke about the schools their children went to in this way. They also spoke about how they belonged to the school community, and that community was often synonymous with the community that surrounded their churches. At the same time, the structure of the leadership of the school by itself is also a community: a community that is inside the broader community that generally supports the school.

In an earlier work, Strike (1999) likened a school community to that of a religious congregation. This seems particularly apt in this case. The schools in this study are united by shared values. They are also places where membership is prized, as can be seen in how the membership in both schools involved in this study is structured. Strike (1999) also notes that, like religious congregations, school communities are familial and nurturing, an aspect that has been spoken about earlier. How the parents in the schools involved worked with the school on multiple levels as leaders, volunteers, and parents is also reflective of the congregational metaphor because people, “interact in multiple and mutually beneficial contexts” (Strike, 1999, p. 47). Finally, Strike’s (1999) observation that strong school communities are less formal than they are bureaucratic can be found in the data, as well. While the participants spoke about the rules that they were to follow –
rules that were in place to make sure things ran smoothly – the impression was that these rules were enforced on a need-to-use basis. Thinking about how Board members and the Principal spoke about their relationship together, the sense was more collegial than formal. Though the Principal was technically subordinate to the Board, the Board was still referring to him as ‘the boss.’ It was only when the balance of the relationship was off that the rules were enforced. This formal informality, and the intertwined relationships between the parties involved in the school, reveals that there are many facets to the school communities involved in this study.

That communities in schools are complex has been well-documented. In her study of the different metaphors used to describe educational communities, Beck (1999) pulls many of these together. In her research, Beck (1999) sees school communities being described as families, musical ensembles, collectives, political entities, and more. This study has focused on how the school community involved was familycentric. Partially, this is the result of the participants of the study being parents of students in the school, but it is also because the metaphor fits the model being described. Beck’s (1999) descriptions of the various metaphors surrounding school communities act as a wise caution to understanding the type of community involved too narrowly. One could as easily describe the communities of the schools in question as being a musical ensemble. In the ensemble, each part of the school’s leadership has a role to fill for the purpose of the school to be fulfilled (Beck, 1999). This can be seen happening in the schools involved in this study. The participants described how the Principal, the Education Committee, and the School Board each had their own role to play in the running of the
school. They also stated that when things were going well, everyone was working toward the same goal by doing their own work, much like an orchestra would.

**Community with Purpose**

Strike (2004) wrestles with this concept of community, as well. He states that community is about, “who we are, and who are ours” (p. 219). This concept begins to sound much more like what those who were being interviewed described. Those interviewed spoke about, “our school” and those who are in, “our community.” There was a real sense of being inside something, of belonging. The school also had a purpose in the community, and part of that purpose was to instill Christian norms as seen through the lens of the Canadian Reformed churches. Strike’s (2004) concept of community speaks to the importance of norms in a school. What follows is a long quote, but it is worth including because of the way it echoes how those interviewed spoke of the school in which they were involved. Strike (1999) writes,

> Community begins in learning the norms of those who care for and about us and ends in caring for and about those whose norms we share. As a rule, people do not choose to affiliate with communities because they are somehow persuaded of the rightness of the community’s norms. Neither do they affiliate with those whose norms somehow appeal to what they naturally like. Normation is not primarily a matter of reason or natural inclination, although both may sometimes be involved. Instead, people begin to internalize the norms of communities because someone cares about them enough to share something they value. Normation begins with caring and belonging, not reasoning and not nature. (p. 222)
The parents and Principals interviewed in this study care about the children in the school where they serve. They care because they are the parents, and they care because they are members of a community with norms they feel are worth sharing. Each parent in the Canadian Reformed churches has their children baptized. With that baptism, each parent promises to raise their child to a life of service to the best of their ability. The school becomes such an important organization to them because, at least in the realm of academic education, it serves as the best of their ability. One might say that, for those interviewed, the community is the tie that wraps the cords of the other supports of the school together and provides stability. Thinking back to the cooperative and supportive school framework, there were various actors that supported the students in school as they progressed from childhood to adulthood. Included in the list, along with school personnel, parents, and the central office actors, were community actors. In the schools in this study, it is the community that the parents and the students belong to that help set the normation that Strike (2004) refers to.

In the schools in this study, the community actors are involved in every strand of support in a very real way. The schools’ supporting community comes from one Christian denomination. It is well-defined by faith, shared values, traditions, and all the aspects Strike (2008) noted. All the actors in the school belong to the Christian community, as well. The parents belong to the community, the school personnel belong to the community, and the Principal also belongs to the greater community. It is this community that acts to bind the other actors together and provide the school with the stability it needs. It is the community that motivates the actors to be both cooperative and supportive.
Implications for Policy

When considering the data presented above, there are implications that could be implemented in policy aimed at increasing parental engagement in schools. First, the data shows that parents can take on a responsible leadership role and successfully manage schools. There were positive examples of how parents worked closely with Principals to mitigate conflict. Also, the long history and multi-generational continuance of enrolment in the school shows that parents feel that the school is successful even without government control and oversight. As such, it would be interesting for policy writers to investigate ways parents could have a more authentic voice in other schools. They could work to give local schools more autonomy so that decisions about curriculum could be made to fit the local community. That may mean, for instance, that the topics dealt with in the elementary social studies curriculum are able to reflect the cultural norms found in the school. Under that model, a school in Brampton, Ontario would be free to teach different topics from a school in Petawawa, Ontario. Using this example, school communities that are not congregational in nature could cater their students’ work to reflect the culture of the geographic area in which they live – thus building community along the way.

Second, though related to the above, policy makers can consider the importance of letting the community build the school instead of building communities with the school. Letting the communities build the school would mean that schools would need ties that could bind them together beyond the education provided. It would mean, as Strike (2008) points out, that schools should be able to specialize, and possibly build strong tightknit communities within the broader community found in the school.
Third, policy makers could look at current practices for inviting parents into the school. They could ask questions about the current policy including the following: With this policy, are parents treated like guests inside our house, or are they more like immediate family? Is the current structure of centralized control of curriculum and funding helping parents feel ownership in the school? How might the current parent councils be better utilized to provide parents with a truly effective and authentic voice?

**Limitations of the Data and Implications for Practice**

This study has many limitations when it comes to bringing the findings to bear in a broader context. First, this study was small in scale. Only two schools were studied and only nine people were interviewed. There may be many more people involved in the school that would have different viewpoints than those expressed here. As such, it would not work to use this study to make whole-scale changes to any school system. Those interviewed did have a consistent view on the importance of parental involvement in school leadership and the effectiveness of it, but it was a small sample.

Second, the population of the school is predominantly Caucasian, from one faith background, and of middle socio-economic status. Thus, when looking at things such as the importance of community and the relevance of parental engagement within it, it should be noted that there were many other factors that bound the parents in the community together besides a common vision of school in the community. Future research could see if the importance of community is the same in other religious schools. Would the community that supports an Islamic school have the same stabilizing effect? A different study could work to replicate an authentic parental leadership model in a low-income area with a homogeneous parent population. The study could ask whether a
parent-led school under these conditions help build a stronger sense of community. Also, the subjects involved in this study were chosen because of the model of parental leadership they employ, and they were a Christian school. Other studies could focus on other Christian schools that employ different leadership models to see if the sense of community would be the same.

A third limitation to the study is the role that the author has in the LCRSS. The author is not far removed from the participants in the study. His role in the school could affect both the participant’s responses in the interview, as well as the author’s interpretations of those responses. To lessen the impact of this possible limitation, the author made it clear to the participants that they were under no obligation to become involved in the study. He also worked carefully to interpret the responses of the participants through the lens of the current research available on parental leadership.

Finally, the uniqueness of these schools being established in Ontario limits the study. In no other province in Canada are private schools given the opportunity to develop on their own as they are in Ontario. With no government funding and only the bare minimum regulations to guide them, these schools were cultivated in an environment that would be hard to replicate. Still, these schools were fostered in a context that allowed them to grow into a stable school leadership model. Now that it has been developed, it may be exported to other areas. Policy makers that are looking to increase parental involvement could look to this model to promote more authentic opportunities for parents to be engaged. The parents in the schools involved in this study were not educational experts. They were just parents who were willing to learn and who were given the opportunity to lead. Policy makers may explore whether parents in public
schools would be able to do the same, and whether doing the same would give the increased parental engagement that they desire to grow (OME, 2010).

There were only two schools involved in this study, but there are many schools in Ontario which could be utilized as subjects for research. The freedom that these schools have had, both faith-based and secular, to develop on their own should make them interesting fields of study for researchers. Without government control, union agendas, and vast amounts of money to spend, these schools provide an education that produces productive and contributing citizens. For that reason alone, they are worth studying.

There are other faith-based schools in Ontario, as well; not only privately-funded religious schools, but also the publicly-funded ones. Researchers whose interests lie in that direction could see if the model presented in this one system is replicated elsewhere. The members of the schools in this study were people who belonged to one church denomination: the Canadian Reformed Church. Other Christian schools are inter-denominational, meaning that parents from many different Christian church denominations send their children to one private school. Researchers might also be interested in how parent engagement in an inter-denominational school differs from a single denominational school like the one in this study. Building out this type of research would further the understanding of community in school, and the basis for an ethic of community.

The fact that these schools serve a specific community can also benefit educational research. In some jurisdictions, there are Afrocentric schools, and there are schools that are located on Aboriginal land to serve an Aboriginal community. These schools are designed intentionally to serve a specific community. These are schools
where it was felt that students with a common ancestry and background would benefit from being taught from their unique cultural perspective. Researchers may be able to use this study to compare findings about parental engagement in these schools, and whether giving parents more leadership in them would be of benefit to the education provided. Researchers may also be interested to follow-up on the distinct ways that parents were invited to participate in these schools; they were not visitors, but owners. It would be helpful to understand the impact of that difference in terms of parental engagement and student learning.

**Conclusion**

This study provides an opportunity to look at two schools in one private school system. It focused on questions of how parental engagement worked in the schools and the impact the schools’ unique design had on that engagement. It was a school system whose policies, staffing, and curriculum are controlled solely by the parents of the children who attend the school.

This study found that the parents interviewed were heavily engaged in the running of the school, but that their being heavily engaged had little impact on their level of engagement with the school work their children were doing. This study also found that the community being served by the school has a significant role to play in the ongoing support of the school.

If the school is a vehicle parents use to help their children travel from childhood to adulthood, it is a vehicle that must be supported by multiple entities. The School Board and policy-setting bodies must support the path that the school takes. The Principals and teachers need to understand the direction and be willing to travel alongside the students,
pulling their own weight. The parents, too, need to be willing to do their part to support
the school in more ways than just paying the bills. They have to put in time, energy, and
any expertise they have.

In the framework that was outlined above, it was mentioned that one of the
questions that would be asked is whether a localized vision for the school would be of
benefit. Using the concept that a cord of three strands is not swiftly broken, one of the
expected outcomes of this study was that the parents in the school would be the ones that
would bind the other actors together, both increasing the strength of the individual strands
and mitigating the individual strand tension that may otherwise rock the school. The data
shows that while the parents do play that stabilizing role to some extent, there is a force
of stability that is stronger than their individual efforts.

The stronger force is the community to which the school belongs. The
community’s vision for what a good school looks like, and what the purpose of a good
school is, is threaded through all the other strands that hold up the school. The school has
a purpose, and that purpose is to help parents uphold promises that they made when their
children were first born. Because of this purpose, not just parents are involved in the
school: there are grandparents, and there are other church members both old and young.
These groups have a common vision for the school, and it is this common vision that
binds the individual supports together. In turn, those supports become a structure for a
parent-led school which will not be quickly broken. This study has shown that when
parents are truly engaged in leadership at a school, it is a function of their community
involvement.


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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how the opportunity to hold governing positions in private schools affects parental engagement in their child’s education. I will be interviewing parents who hold positions in the School Boards and/or Education Committees at schools which belong to the Canadian Reformed Christian school system. After the interviews are transcribed, I will be analyzing the data gleaned from them to make observations about how being in a leadership position affects a parent’s engagement in their child’s school. It will also serve to fill gaps in the literature surrounding parent-run schools and parental engagement.
1.2. Confidentiality

All participant’s answers will be confidential, and the results will be shared using pseudonyms for both the participants names. The names of the schools involved will also not be mentioned, but will be referred to as, “the elementary school”, or “the secondary school.”

1.3. Final Data

Copies of the transcribed data will be provided to those interviewed for their final review before the data is analysed.

1.4. Recording

The participants will be requested to allow recording to be made of the interviews as they proceed. This will be done so that the analysis of the data can be made in the most accurate way possible. Data collected during this study will be stored electronically in a secure location. Data will be kept for 6 months following the approval of the final report, after which time the data will be deleted.

1.5. Consent form

Ask the participants to review the consent form prior to the interview, and during the interview go over it with them to ensure they understand the form and answer any questions they may have.

2. Introductory questions

2.1. Background:

a. Tell me a little about yourself?

b. How would you describe your role in the school?
c. How long have you been in a governing position?
d. What were the factors that convinced you to be a part of the governance body of this school?

3. Interview Questions

3.1. What do you feel the governance group you belong to contributes to the running of the school?

3.2. Tell me about the relationship between the Principal and the parents that are on the School Board and education committee. How are decisions that may impact the whole school community made?

3.3. What, if any, were the community influences that impacted your decision to be part of this school?

3.4. How has being in a governance position in the school impacted how you view the relationship between the school and your family?

3.5. Do you think that your level of engagement with the school will change when you are no longer in a governance position?

4. Wrap-Up

4.1. Thank the participant for their willingness to be interviewed and for their thoughts and insights.

4.2. Remind participants about the next steps involved.
Appendix B

Interview Guide: Principal

Interview Guide: Principal Version

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1. Introduction

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The purpose of this study to explore how the opportunity to hold governing positions in private schools affects parental engagement in their child’s education. I have interviewed parents who hold positions in the School Boards and/or Education Committees at schools which belong to the Canadian Reformed Christian school system. To add some perspective to the data collected in these interviews, I also wish to interview the Principals who serve in the schools. After the interviews are transcribed, I will be analyzing the data gleaned from them to make observations about how being in a leadership position affects a parent’s engagement in their child’s school. It will also serve to fill gaps in the literature surrounding parent-run schools and parental engagement.
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2.1. Background:

   e. Tell me a little about yourself?

   f. How would you describe your role in the school?
g. How long have you been in a governing position?

h. What were the factors that convinced you to be a part of the governance body of this school?

3. Interview Questions

3.1. How do you feel that the governance group (Board or Education Committee) contributes to the running of the school?

3.2. Tell me about the relationship between the Principal and the parents that are on the school’s Board and/or Education Committee. How are decisions made, and what role does the Principal play? What role does the Board or committee play? Are there other actors involved in decision-making processes?

3.3. What, if any, were the community influences that impact decisions to have parents be part of the governing body at this school?

3.4. How has working with parents in a governance position at the school impacted how you view parental involvement in education?

3.5. Are you able to give examples of how parents holding governance positions in the school changes the level of engagement they have with their children’s education?

4. Wrap-Up

4.1. Thank the participant for their willingness to be interviewed and for their thoughts and insights.

4.2. Remind participants about the next steps involved.