

# Increasing Local Voice in Education Policy & Decision-Making

## Minister's Mandate

In September 2021, government mandated that the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Education: "Consult with a variety of groups, including parents from across the province, teachers, administrators, program assistants, representatives from the African Nova Scotian, First Nations, and disability community to determine a governance model for P-12 education that allows for increased local voice in education policy and decision-making."

## Introduction

Student success and well-being is best supported when everyone works together. This includes families, students, and community members who have a direct interest in their school but do not always feel they have a way to share ideas and concerns.

During the last school year, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development asked students, families, School advisory councils (SACs), community members, and the public how to increase local voice in their schools and in the education system. This summary report highlights what people told us and how we are acting on their advice. An infographic and the full report can be found at [Strengthening Local Voices](#), on the Education and Early Childhood Development website (ednet.ns.ca).

## How We Engaged

**3,349**

participants  
in online survey

**1,401**

comments  
in a virtual  
town hall

**25,635**

interactions on  
comments from  
virtual town hall

**17**

focus groups  
across the  
province

## Who We Engaged

### Phase 1

School advisory councils (SACs) and comités d'école consultatifs (CECs). SACs and CECs include parents, teachers, administrators, and some program assistants.

### Phase 2

Parents, teachers, administrators, other school staff, Mi'kmaq and People of African descent and representatives from the disability community

## What We Heard

School advisory councils are in place to give students, families, and community members local voice in their schools. We heard that many are doing great work, but people also identified challenges.

- School advisory councils feel they have no real influence or impact.
- School advisory councils feel they lack resources and support.
- Families are not aware of or well-connected to their school advisory councils but said they would use such a group if they knew it existed.
- Recruitment of school advisory council members is challenging, particularly for diverse members.
- Diverse groups and newcomers face language, cultural, and other barriers when they have questions or want to provide feedback.
- People want to better understand what is happening in the education system and the priorities of their school, region, and the province.
- Families are uncertain about where to go for information and want one clear point of contact.

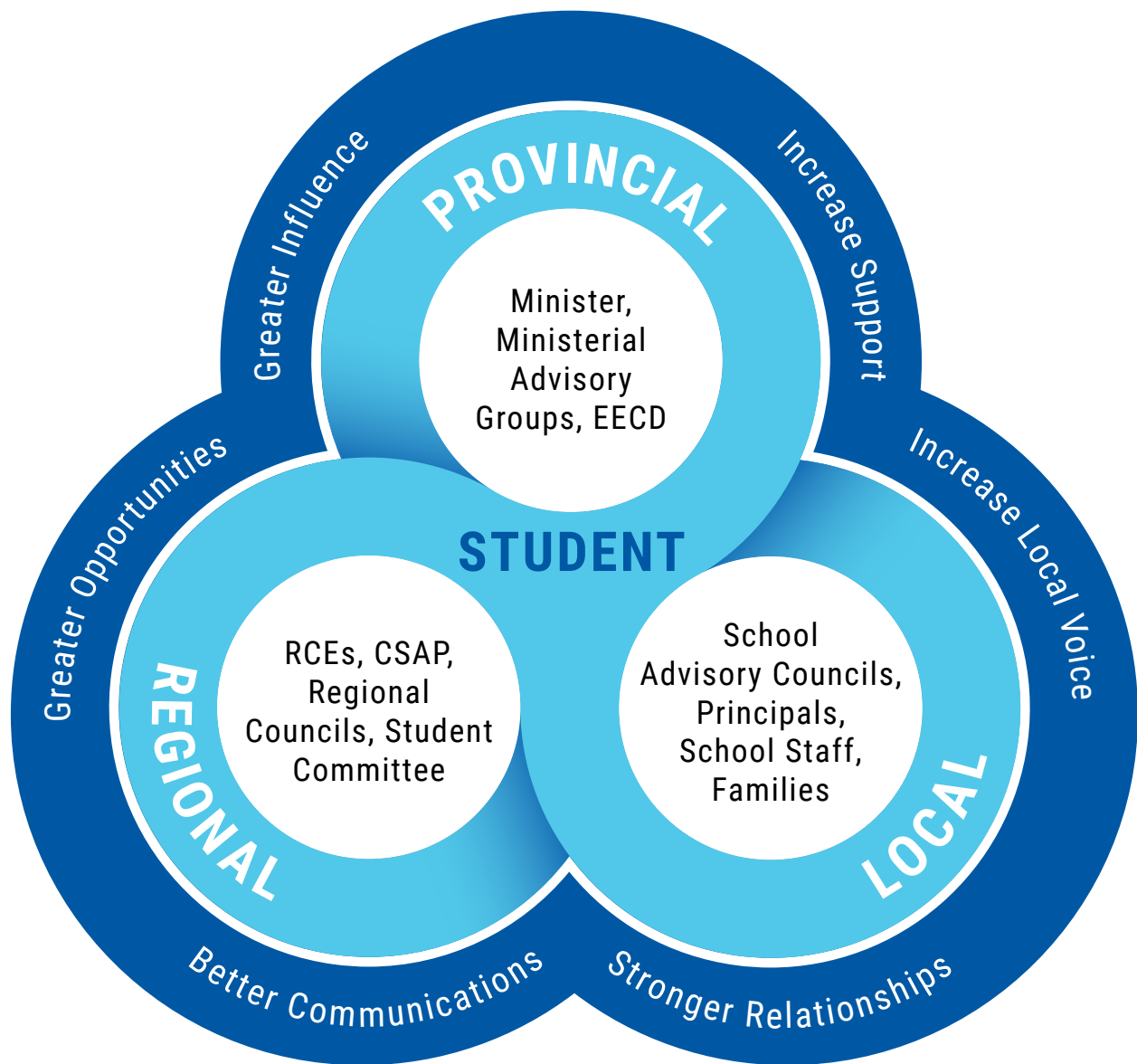
People also highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for feedback in a variety of ways, including accessible and inclusive formats, and strengthening community connections and partnerships.

School advisory councils said the areas they want to influence most are: student well-being and safety, school programming, and decisions on school buildings.

# Acting on What We Heard

Local voices will be strengthened in education policy and decision-making by the enhancements below. The current governance structure of the CSAP continues, therefore not all of the actions identified will apply.

1. Increase Support, Increase Local Voice
2. Better Communications, Stronger Relationships
3. Greater Opportunities, Greater Influence



## PROVINCIAL

Minister,  
Ministerial  
Advisory  
Groups, EECD

- Setting the vision: the system working together for students with more voice and influence at the local school level
- Creating an Innovation Fund
- Hosting annual Professional Development & Networking Conference
- More consulting—Minister regularly visiting schools and meeting with educators
- Monitoring and reporting on progress

## REGIONAL

RCEs, CSAP,  
Regional  
Councils, Student  
Committee

- Hosting public engagement meetings
- Promoting SAC recruitment and role
- Enhancing staff to support SACs
- Creating Regional SAC, Regional Student Advisory Committee
- Improving Parent Navigation to ensure families get questions answered in a timely manner

## LOCAL

School  
Advisory Councils,  
Principals,  
School Staff,  
Families

- More influence over existing and new funds
- More support from region for expanded role, including annual conference
- More parent and diverse voices
- More data to monitor schools and provide advice

# 1

## Increase Support, Increase Local Voice

*“Although the majority of [survey] respondents (66%) were aware of SACs, most of them (69%) had not taken their concerns, questions, input, or feedback to their SACs, suggesting that there is a potential underutilization of SACs as a channel for local voice feedback.”*

*–From the Thinkwell Report on Enhancing Local Voice*

School advisory council members are already giving time and doing whatever they can to support student achievement and well-being. These actions are intended to give them a stronger voice with more funding, information, and influence so they can be more effective in meeting this goal. In turn, parents and community members are expected to be more aware of school advisory councils, want to volunteer their time and, ultimately, improve the school experience for all students.

Data to inform decision-making will include:

- [Student Success Survey](#)
- [Provincial Assessment Results](#)
- School Improvement Plans

Action – Increase Support	Impact – Increase Local Voice
<p>School advisory councils will be able to apply for grants up to \$10,000 from a new Innovation Fund. This is in addition to their existing funding (\$5000 + \$1 per student in their school.)</p> <p>Councils will also have more influence on how funds from the existing Healthy Schools Grant are used.</p>	<p>School advisory councils will have access to more funding and have more influence on how existing funding is spent.</p> <p>This funding is tied to what school advisory councils said was most important to them: influencing student well-being.</p>
<p>School advisory council members will be given more data and information on student achievement and well-being, as well as current and projected enrolments for their family of schools.</p>	<p>School advisory councils will have more information to advise and monitor progress on their school improvement plan and more voice on teams and committees that work on issues important to them. This should lead to improvements in student well-being and achievement and help with planning for priorities like school boundaries and capital builds.</p>
<p>New terms of reference are now in place for School Steering Teams that work on new school design. The school advisory council must be represented on that team.</p>	
<p>An annual professional development session will be held for all school advisory council chairs and principals from across the province.</p> <p>Regions will promote the role of school advisory councils and have dedicated staff to help them communicate and work effectively with their school communities.</p>	<p>School advisory councils will be supported in their growing role and influence and have more opportunity to network and learn from each other.</p> <p>Families and community members will begin to see school advisory councils as an effective way to get information and share feedback, and as a group that they would consider joining.</p>
<p>School advisory councils can add more parent members on their council than what is currently allowed.</p>	<p>Parents can have a greater voice and influence in supporting student achievement and well-being.</p>

# 2

## Better Communications, Stronger Relationships

*“One of the most consistent findings across the consultation was the lack of a defined process for providing local voice feedback and receiving information. The school community reported feeling unsure about how to provide feedback and the expectation for receiving follow-up.”*  
—From the Thinkwell Report on Enhancing Local Voice

School advisory councils and the broader public want more information about what is happening in education, they want more opportunities to provide feedback, and they want to know how their feedback was used. These actions are intended to improve two-way communications and build relationships and public confidence so everyone can work more effectively together to support students.

Data to inform decision-making will include:

- [Student Success Survey](#)
- [Provincial Assessment Results](#)
- Regional Improvement Plans

Action—Better Communications	Impact—Stronger Relationships
Regional Executive Directors and their staff will host public engagement meetings three times a year to share information, seek feedback and answer questions. The meetings will be open to all and will be well-advertised to school communities.	Families and community members will get to know educational leaders in their schools/regions, have better information, and a face-to-face opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.
Parent navigation will be improved. This work will include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• reviewing and promoting the role of parent navigators,</li><li>• setting standards for responding to parent concerns more quickly,</li><li>• enhancing regional websites to ensure families have an easy way to find information.</li></ul>	Families will know: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• how to get answers to questions,</li><li>• be assured of a timely response,</li><li>• how to get help with broader issues that cannot be resolved at the school, and</li><li>• how to share feedback.</li></ul>

# 3

## Greater Opportunities, Greater Influence

*“Various groups and councils (e.g., youth advisory councils, school advisory councils, provincial meetings) were mentioned as being good avenues to provide local voice feedback.”*

*–From the Thinkwell Report on Enhancing Local Voice*

All voices in the school community are not equally heard, particularly the voices of students and people from diverse communities. Also, people and groups may be working hard on their own but are not well-connected to others working on the same issues. These actions are intended to give everyone more opportunity to share their ideas and concerns, and to strengthen connections and partnerships within the school community and across the region.

Data to inform decision-making will include:

- [Student Success Survey](#)
- [Provincial Assessment Results](#)
- Regional Improvement Plans

Action—Greater Opportunities	Impact—Greater Influence
Each region/board will create a student advisory committee. The Regional Executive Director/ Superintendent will meet with them at least twice a year. These committees will also be connected to the Minister’s Student Advisory Committee.	Students will be able to share ideas and concerns with the head of their Regional Centre for Education/ Conseil scolaire acadien provincial and will learn more about what is happening in their own region/board and other parts of the province.
Each region will create a regional school advisory council made up of primarily SAC members. The region must ensure that the council reflects the diversity of the region. The work of the councils will focus on student issues across the regional, including advising on accessible and inclusive communications and planning for new schools and major upgrades. Representatives will also participate in the provincewide professional development session for school advisory councils.	More people will have a greater voice in addressing regional education issues. Everyone will come together to build relationships and trust, and work on the shared interest of supporting students.

## Conclusion

School advisory councils and relationships within school communities and across regions are very different. As a result, some actions in this plan will be felt right away, while others may take effect later in this school year or next. The goal is to enhance local voice in education policy and decision making, so that the Nova Scotians:

- understand the priorities and work of the education system,
- know where to go to share ideas and concerns,
- feel like they are being heard, and
- feel like their concerns have been considered and addressed.

These feelings and understandings are features of effective governance of the education system with everyone working together to support the achievement and well-being for all students.