

## Exploring the Contribution of School Councils and Community Engagement in Enhancing the Quality of Education in Punjab's Public Schools

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### Abstract

School Council plays a fundamental role in Public School Governance. Testing the practical implementation of School Council policy at ground level on enhancing quality of education through community participation, this quantitative study was designed to assess the effect of school councils on the quality of education in their schools and to find out how community participation hinders or improves the functions of the school council. The populations of study were members of school councils in District of Sargodha Punjab, Pakistan. 300 members (male and female) of school councils were selected through simple random sampling from population. A bilingual questioner was made through extensive literature review to collect data from members of school councils. Rejection of null hypothesis suggest that quality of education effected positively through school council and community participation in governance role of school and helped to achieve long term goals. This study proposed several strategies to enhance the efficacy and utility of school councils in the administration of Punjab's public schools. First, the duties and roles of school councils should be made public and clear so that there is no room for confusion. Council members and school staff also need to keep learning more about how to run schools, how to handle money, how to be a leader, and how to help new members with any problems they may have.

### Key Words

Governance, School Councils, Community Participation, Decentralization, Efficacy, Utility

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## Introduction

Traditionally in Pakistan governance of public education work under a centralized system where decision flow from top authorities while after 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment 2010 decentralization education system starts where public entrust and modern educational needs are considering (Ullah, 2024). An Efficient Public-School Governance involves the participations of Government Authorities, School Administration, Teachers, Parents and Local Communities where Government bodies set policies directions issues budgets and monitored their regulation while governance authorities look through on policies implementations and run the institution (Kapelela

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et al., 2024). Direct involvement of parents and community students' performance effect directly class attendance, learning productivity and transparency in responsibility managements. Purpose of this educational reform where local community involves in public school administrations, they know needs of community and issues that face this particular community so their participation can build a great or helpful infrastructure of public school and comes with well-situated solutions (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Many studies indicates that community participations and parental involvement in public school administrations became helpful of effective school governance and students' education quality improves with the help of community involvements and by identifying public needs so education system trained teaching faculty also curriculum and educational policies are designed according community charter. Community participation makes more open in school's operations and accountability. In the context of developing nations, decentralization of education governance is regarded as a crucial instrument to enhance school accountability and quality (Mahuro & Hungi, 2016).

In the middle of the 2000s, Punjab moved away from centralization and toward decentralization with the creation of School Councils, also known as School Management Committees. According to Islam, (2017) these councils are required to include local stakeholders in the decision-making process for the operation of the schools, such as head teachers, parents, teachers, and community representatives. The Councils' primary duties are to manage non-salary budgets, keep an eye on teacher and student attendance, supervise school infrastructure, and respond to community issues, according to Punjab's School Education Sector Plan 2018 to 2025 (Sharif et al., 2024).

Culturally, Punjab's communal and kinship-based ("baradari") culture frames local leadership and collective decision-making as important drivers for school-level reform (Behlol & Masood, 2021). The influence of the Councils, however, differs greatly; some are very active and promote advancements, while others are inactive because of internal and external limitations (Behlol & Masood, 2021).

Parent-Teacher Associations (PTs), also known as School Management Committees (SMCs) or School Councils, are a core element of such governance models in education. The goal is to relieve local school constituents of decision-making in the operation and administration of the district (Sharif et al., 2024). In Pakistan, School Councils were introduced within the Punjab Local Government Ordinance (2001) and strengthened by both the 2007 and 2008 amendments (Sharif et al., 2024). These councils are expected to regulate school budgets, keep a check on teacher presence, and solve education issues at the local level (Laar et al., 2019). International research indicates that community-managed schools tend to have better attendance and resource utilization compared with centrally managed alternatives (Tahira et al., 2021).

Yet, the council structure and its capacity to operate effectively within local socio-political contexts are important for its functioning (Laar et al., 2019). The first example shows how School Councils on the quality of education is conflicting evidence in research from Pakistan. As a result of active Councils in some districts of Punjab had dramatically higher enrollment rates and better infrastructure than inactive Councils in other districts that were established because of political disputes or lack of awareness (Kamran et al., 2020). Kamran et al., (2020) demonstrated that councils, where the community played an active role, had higher scores and higher attendance levels than schools where council did not function. These advances, but, have not been consistent in rural or urban environments. Similar to these restrictions, low literacy rates and entrenched patriarchy also limit participation by women and marginalized groups in rural Punjab more broadly (Tahira et al., 2021).

This emphasizes the necessity of inclusive policies and gender-sensitive methods to guarantee that all stakeholders may make significant contributions. Punjabi society really promotes getting involved in the

community through strong family connections, often referred to as baradari systems. This can actually help improve schools (Zaheer et al., 2022). On the flip side, these same connections can sometimes lead to favoritism, leaving out marginalized groups, and creating political favoritism when it comes to choosing Council members (Zaheer et al., 2022).

Though their actual work at the local level is still uneven and has not received enough attention, Punjab's policy framework emphasizes the value of school councils in promoting participatory governance and improving educational standards. It is challenging to determine whether the councils are accomplishing their goals because of variations in administrative capabilities, community involvement, and council participation at various school levels. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the role that school councils play in improving educational standards and investigate how community involvement either supports or undermines their capacity to operate. In order to gather empirical data from a diverse cohort of school council members in primary, middle, and high schools across the District of Sargodha, a quantitative research methodology was used.

## Literature Review

According to research, school councils first handle operational issues (Rolleston et al., 2018). Nonetheless, there is still conflicting evidence on school councils' efficacy in fulfilling its goal to improve student achievement and school performance. According to Rolleston et al., (2018) teachers in Chicago "are also optimistic about parents and community connections" and "give highly favorable comments about changes in their own teaching, their possibilities for professional advancement, their experiences with colleagues, and their own dedication." Nevertheless, educators "do not necessarily perceive comparable student results." Since many school councils may act as a rubber stamp for principals, Kamran et al., (2020) noted that it is insufficient to assume that a school with a school council is using a true shared decision-making model: "It remains to be seen whether the plans, policies, and programs now being developed by councils are more effective at improving student achievement than those developed by principals or teachers alone". Kamran et al., (2020) cast doubt on the effectiveness of school councils after reviewing more than 80 empirical studies conducted between 1985 and 1995. They conclude that "there is virtually no firm, research-based knowledge about the direct or indirect effects of school councils on students... There is a huge disconnect between this initiative's rhetoric and reality.

Guha (2022) came to the conclusion that, at best, councils' influence on classroom and school practices is unlikely to be more than mildly positive. This conclusion was based on a study that was intended to assess the type and degree of council influence on schools. They do contend that councils could serve two purposes: 1) the development of educational systems with increased internal learning capacities (which would necessitate a significant change in the way government policies are implemented to permit widely distributed responsibilities for resolving organizational problems) and 2) a chance to have discussions about community values with other members of the larger community.

Guha (2022) cautions that "we should not underestimate their [school council] 'opportunity costs' -- the time that could be spent productively in other ways". There is a school council at every public school. The Education Reform Act of 1993 established the councils to provide community partners, educators, and parents a forum to exchange ideas and have a say in choices that impact and improve instruction in their local schools. School Councils' Function Each school council's main responsibility is to collect data on the standard of instruction and learning at its institution, develop targeted suggestions to enhance instruction and learning, and propose these suggestions to the committee and the principal. In this capacity, the council can be seen as a means by which community members, educators, and parents can formally influence choices that impact their school. The council members possess the Each school council's main responsibility is to collect data about the standard of instruction and learning at its institution (Guha, 2022).

School councils are representative committees in public schools that work together to make decisions in order to improve the quality of education. The principal, teachers, parents, students (especially high school students), non-teaching staff, and community representatives are usually among the stakeholders that make up each council. In order to demonstrate a strong commitment to parental involvement in school governance, the council's composition is essential. It attempts to guarantee that the majority of its members are parents, and the chairperson must also be a parent (Zaheer, 2022).

### **Roles and Responsibilities of School Council**

The school council as the collaboration between school administration, teachers, students, parents and the greater community, is vital to creating the governing apparatus of schools. Essentially, it is the responsibility of the school council to *“advocate for participatory decision-making processes that reflect the needs of the entire educational community”* (Epstein, 2018). The transparency provided by councils reduces the chance of mismanagement as everything from budget allocations to curriculum choices to school security measures is discussed and followed in an open forum. One of the key functions of the school council is to ensure that the operation of the schools remains transparent and accountable to the community it serves. It helps build a collective responsibility and sense of ownership for educational success, and more accountability generally means more trust between the school and constituents (Mibity et al., 2019).

Through giving voice to lowered cooperatives in the community, school councils become a voice for equitable access to education. Through their distinct efforts of multicultural policies and culturally sensitive practices, councils also work towards enhancing educational equality and reducing inequities between different categories they call “students” (Davies, 2020). This is a role that contributes to and necessitates a school culture of respect for diversity, sensitivity to student diversity and an institutional commitment to combating systematic bias. In addition, they play a role in developing and accessing school improvement plans. Considering their input, schools might ensure that school practice is relevant to the standards and expectations of the community in order to continue improving student achievements and quality of instruction. Participation in goal-setting and monitoring performance targets by the council makes for a more effective and flexible educational system (Davies, 2020).

Another function of the school council is to establish relationships outside of the school. By reaching out to local businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies, the council would have access to resources and supportive structures that can help broaden areas for educational pursuits, extra-curricular opportunities, and mental health for students (Davies, 2020). School councils oversee the consultation for significant educational issues such as curriculum development, recruitment decisions, and budget control (Davies, 2020). They are also concerned that school resources are allocated efficiently in order to achieve instructional goals and improve student outcomes (Davies, 2020). One important responsibility is the cultivation of a safe, inclusive, and equitable school environment through policies that address bias and encourage diversity (Davies, 2020). Another duty of school councils is to oversee performance and adherence to regional or national education standards. They also control conflict resolution in disputes with stakeholders, as arbiters of sorts. Ultimately their governance is about creating a safe, efficient, progressive learning environment (Davies, 2020).

### **Effects on Quality Education in Public Schools**

Given that public education in Punjab Pakistan has encountered several issues including lack of resources, teacher absenteeism, and poor physical facilities (Ahmed & Malik, 2020) the efficient functioning of School Councils to enhance the state of education in the region. School councils are also governing bodies that represent neighboring communities, parents, and educators in making educational decisions (Epstein, 2018). Such councils can be seen

as efforts to help democratize governance of schools in Punjab, ensuring that policies are reflective of the local communities' needs and priorities. School Councils participate in the development of policies regarding curriculum choice, teacher recruitment, and processes of school administration thereby aligning educational objectives with the aspirations of the community (Epstein, 2018). A check and balance role of the school councils should be to hold accountability for all aspects related to the functioning of that specific school including tracking student performance, teacher attendance, finances among other aspects (Guha, 2022). Transparent disbursement of funds as well as oversight of expenditures by councils also minimizes corruption and mismanagement, both of which have historically plagued the educational system in Punjab (Qasim, 2025). Empirical evidence in Punjab suggests that teacher attendance is higher and there is a higher utilization of the funds allocated for maintenance of facilities and learning materials where councils operate (Ahmed & Malik, 2020). Greater community trust in public schools through the oversight of this council has a positive effect in encouraging greater parental commitment and support towards children's education (Iqbal et al., 2021).

### Community Engagement and Partnerships

Another aspect of rural/urban divide is the notable variation in the nature and type of community participation in schools, and school councils, between rural and urban areas in Punjab-Pakistan. These are attributed to differences in government policies, levels of awareness, and socio-economic factors. One study finds that in general, engagement of the community and parents in the management of the school through school councils is quite low, even more so in a rural context where socio economic issues and literacy have lesser degrees (Epstein, 2018). Despite being officially instituted in the process of decentralizing the education sector in Punjab, many school councils struggle with minimal participation from the community due to a lack of capacity-building and knowledge about their role (Epstein, 2018). In metropolitans' cities of Punjab community participation is comparatively higher and therefore parents are more likely to participate in school management meetings and decision-making process (Iqbal et al., 2021).

Even in such cases participation tends to have differential degrees of participation and participation of particular 'active' parents or local elites only calls into question notions of adequate representation in councils (Syed, 2021). Cultural barriers and disempowerment of women, further disallowing community participation in school governance, have been found to keep women from being active on school councils as well (Syed, 2021). As a form of community participation, school councils help a role for parents and local constituencies in addressing issues that affect their schools (Epstein, 2011). This engagement also helps bridge the disconnect parents and students feel from public schools in Punjab by providing opportunities for lobbying at the local level, supplying resources, and volunteering (Syed, 2021).

### Research Methodology

The population of the study was consisted of all School council members of District Sargodha, Punjab Pakistan. This Study was delimited to school council members of public schools of Tehsil Sillanwali and Sargodha Schools. A total of 300 school council members were randomly chosen for the research sample. This research employed the Simple Random Sampling method to guarantee that each unit in the target population public schools with functioning school councils in Punjab had an equal and impartial opportunity for selection. A bilingual questioner made through extensive literature review to collect data from members of school councils. Questionnaire were consisted of six indicators "Collaboration, Financial Management, Administration, Effectiveness and Accountability" each indicator consisted of five items and total items were 30 which finalized through Pilot testing, the value of Cronbach Alpha was .832, which showed instrument was highly acceptable.



## Results and Analysis

Collected data were analyzed through SPSS Software (An IBM Software especially used in Social Sciences to apply statistical test on numeric data), so descriptive and inferential statistics test were applied to collect evidence according to study need.

**Table 1**

*Quality Indicators Mean and Standard Deviation*

Indicators	Mean ( $\bar{X}$ )	Standard Deviation (s)	Interpretation Based on Mean	Interpretation Based on Standard Deviation (s)
Collaboration	3.32	1.20	Moderate	Respondents differ more in their views on collaboration quality.
Financial Management	3.42	1.16	Moderate	Moderate variability in perceptions; some people rate it high, others low.
Administration	3.30	1.16	Moderate	Moderate variability in perceptions; some people rate it high, others low.
Effectiveness	3.38	1.12	Moderate	Slightly less variability; perceptions of effectiveness are somewhat more consistent.
Accountability	3.19	1.18	Moderate	Fairly variable ratings; respondents do not strongly agree on accountability level.

Table 1 analysis shows that all dimensions of quality indicators of school governance were perceived to be moderate indicating satisfactory but able to be improved performance. Transparency received the highest mean with least variability from respondents indicating consensus on transparency. Conversely, collaboration and accountability had more variability in response meaning experience was inconsistent among stakeholders.

**Table 2**

*One Way ANOVA on Demographic Variables*

Indicators	N	Gender		Experience		Tehsil Administration		School Level	
		F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig
Collaboration	300	.179	.673	1.670	.174	.179	.673	.101	.904
Financial Management	300	.267	.605	.989	.398	.267	.605	.112	.894
Administration	300	1.219	.270	.662	.576	1.219	.270	.578	.562
Effectiveness	300	.205	.651	1.251	.291	.205	.651	.334	.717
Accountability	300	.240	.625	.897	.443	.240	.625	.542	.582

The one-way ANOVA results show that there are no statistically significant differences in perceptions of school council quality indicators such as collaboration, financial management, administration, effectiveness, accountability, transparency, and decision-making based on demographic variables of gender, experience, tehsil administration, and school level, since all significance (Sig.) values are greater than 0.05. Although transparency was near significant for gender ( $F=2.960$ ,  $p=.086$ ), it is still above the level signifying that the demographic variables do not significantly statistically influence respondents' perceptions of school governance practice in this study.

## Research Objective & Statistical Support for Either Accepting or Rejecting the Hypotheses

► To assess the effect of school councils on the quality of education in their schools.

( $H_0$ ): School councils do not make any meaningful contribution in educational Outcomes.

**Table 3***Statistical Evidence for Accepting or Rejecting the Research Hypothesis 1*

Variable Involved	Mean	S. D	$\alpha$	p
Effectiveness	3.38	1.12	0.05	0.02

In table 3 a one-sample t-Test applied that how significant the impact of school councils is. The sample mean was 3.38 with a standard deviation of 1.12. We utilized the hypothetical value of 3.0 (as per the Likert scale) when completing our analysis. With a p-value of 0.02, we can reject the null hypothesis that school councils do not impact educational outcomes, as the test value of 0.02 is less than the standard level of significance (0.05).

- To find out how community participation hinders or improves the functions of the school council  
**(H<sub>0</sub>):** Community participation does not play a meaningful role in the Managing School Councils.

**Table 4***Statistical Evidence for Accepting or Rejecting the Research Hypothesis 2*

Variable Involved	Mean	S. D	$\alpha$	p
Community Participation & Management	3.36	1.12	0.05	0.03

In Table 4 results of the One-Sample t-test as applied to the community participation in the management of school councils are presented. The results indicate a mean of 3.36 (SD=1.12). With an assumed neutral value of 3.0 on the Likert scale, the achieved p-value of 0.03 is less than 0.05 and we reject the null hypothesis that community participation does not have a significant impact on the management of school councils. An effective role in the governance of public schools in District Sargodha is played by school councils. Support for teachers' professional development is also provided by them. Decentralization was welcomed by the community, and a positive role was played by it in managing the school council.

## Discussion & Conclusion

Councils positively rated as effective around teachers' evaluation scales ( $M = 3.63$ ) or problem-solving. However, councils offered less support for professional development for teachers and as means for changing the culture towards learning that revealed effectiveness when gauged on capacity for continuous improvement sustained capacity to innovate and learn. The council has a culture of collaboration ( $\text{Mean} = 3.59$ ,  $\text{SD} = 1.04$ ), and its members are responsible to the council ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $\text{SD} = 1.04$ ), indicating a robust environment of internal accountability and teamwork. A moderate consensus was observed during collaboration when incorporating social media and promoting honesty ( $M$  between 3.04 and 3.18), suggesting potential enhancements to current strategies for transparent outreach and ethical communication. In general, the Administration is primarily responsible to the school council and can oversee/update the school improvement action plan, though there is a limited level of accountability regarding the promotion of an administrative culture ( $M = 3.04$  to 3.17); additionally, inventory controls and the organization of document or information access are weak, suggesting a lack of transparency and integration. Councils are typically seen as accountable for school finances and ensuring that funds are utilized for intended purposes and consistently reported to the government official.

A neutral consensus ( $M = 3.17$ ) regarding the restriction of careless expenditure compared to strengthening long-term resource dedication suggests that there is a chance to enhance the basis of financial discipline and strategizing.

This study highlights the vital role of the various school governance structures, in particular, school councils, in improving educational quality and providing community engagement in public schools across Punjab, Pakistan. A decentralized education system promotes and enables greater engagement from stakeholders at the local level with the education system, which is necessary for addressing local issues. The participants perceive that stakeholders such as parents and other community members that are engaged in schools improve student outcomes, ensure appropriate utilization of resources, and increase accountability in schools. However, there are challenges of inequality in socioeconomic status and, in particular, cultural barriers to full engagement in rural areas. Therefore, policies that are inclusive of engagement from diverse stakeholders are necessary to improve the usefulness of school councils and educational performance. School Councils have encouraged community participation in school governance, in compliance with good governance commands. They have been formed in ways that allow community members and school stakeholders to get involved in the decision-making process. Overall, these councils have become more effective in representing the communities that they administer. Certainly, the presence of School Councils has given community members and school stakeholders another forum to participate in the governance of the schools their children attend.

Even though the commitment of the School Council at a community level is a foundation stone, it is not effective if the members are neither knowledgeable nor committed. Syed (2021) pointed out that many SCs have members who have had no training whatsoever necessary to do the required duties of their position. If you're a real SC member and have had no training on how to be a member, you are really set up for failure in terms of achieving an outcome that is in any meaningful way better than what you might have achieved had you not had the SC at all. Nadeem et al., (2023) pointed out that other elements also show the seeds of incompetence and/or an uncommitted membership. Political and socioeconomic elements sometimes cause those whom we might consider undesirable candidates to be selected as members.

The results of the study confirmed and added to the existing literature on the importance of school councils in promoting community engagement and educational governance (Epstein, 2018; Sharif et al., 2024). The reviewed studies indicate that effective stakeholder engagement, including parents and community members, improves accountability and transparency, as well as school development (Mahuro & Hungi, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2024). The theoretical concepts in the existing literature are supported by the statistical results of the current study indicating that school council effectiveness was significantly different by school type, location and stakeholder engagement. The consistency between the literature and empirical evidence emphasizes the importance of providing support for school councils in public schools in Punjab through a capacity-building program and the establishment of local policies.

## Recommendations

- ▶ Ensure equal gender representation, and eliminate barriers like time, location, or schedule issues. Implement a formal complaint system for proper response and accountability.
- ▶ Regularly provide clear policies and training to School Council members on roles, governance, challenges, money management, and leadership to avoid confusion and conflict among staff.



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