James Clavell (1981) wrote *The Children’s Story* in response to his deep concern over how American young people had learned to parrot the Pledge of Allegiance without comprehending the meaning of the words. The concern has Orwellian and Huxleian visions of a society that is uncritical, compliant and stagnant. In the west, a deep rooted belief is that a society’s well being is expressed through its democratic principles and ideals which have been clearly tied to the purpose of public education both in the United States and in Canada (Osborne, 1999). As Dewey states, democracy should be the centre of our efforts to educate young people in society:

> The problem of education in its relation to the direction of social change is all one with the problem of finding out what democracy means in its total range of concrete applications: domestic, international, religious, cultural, economic, and political. ... the trouble... is that we have taken democracy for granted: we have thought and acted as if our forefathers had founded it once and for all we have forgotten that it has to be enacted and new in every generation, in every year, in every day, in the living relations of person to persons, and all social forms and institutions. Forgetting this... we have been negligent in creating a school that should be the constant nurse of democracy. (1940, pp 357-358)

There are certain principles, truths or concepts held in our society on which much seems to rest. Because they are important, we seek them out so as to provide a pivotal principle with
which to develop understanding to deal with complex phenomenon. Murphy (1999) has contributed to this search by introducing three new paradigms for educational change and excellence: school improvement, democratic community and social justice. In a recent chapter of the 101st Yearbook for the National Society for the Study of Education, titled “Leadership for Democratic Community in Schools”, Furman and Starratt (2002) argue for democratic community as the new centre for educational leadership in schools.

The review of the literature since the 1980's by Furman and Starratt (2002) summarize a rise in research and practices of school, family and community involvement in education of youth at a time when the metaphor for schools as formal organizations or market has emerged to one of community (Sergiovanni, 1998). Moreover, new communitarians and others have pointed to the loss of community and collective life where concern over “the balance between social forces and the person, between community and autonomy, between the common good and liberty, between individual rights and social responsibilities” (Etzioni, 1998, p.x) are in evidence. In these areas of discourse, values are predominantly displayed that support equity, inclusion, mutual influence and candor (Rusch, 1998) - basic elements of democratic practice. These developments can be attributed to a number of social and political factors that are challenging school systems today. Darling-Hammond (1998) views these factors as culminating in three circumstances that face contemporary schools:

1. The growing importance of educational success to individuals and societies around the world which provokes a corresponding need to create much more productive schools quickly.

2. The explosion of knowledge and the rapid pace of technological change suggests that
what students will need to learn - and what schools must be expected to transmit - is both more complex and more difficult to codify in easily managed policy tools like curriculum guides, text books and tests.

3. Much of the task of preparing many more citizens for more complex kinds of learning is contingent upon dealing well with diversity, a task that 20th century bureaucracies are ill-equipped to handle. (p.642)

To meet these challenges, developmental strategies that build individual and community capacities under the umbrella of a democratic community are being sought as enabling conditions for school improvement and student success.

Introduction

The centre-piece of this paper is an account of a literature review (Furman and Starratt, 2002) and the author’s conceptualization of democratic community from an American perspective as the new centre for school improvement. Attention is directed next to a provincial government document, specifically to key aspects of educational policy (METY, 2002) that focuses on student success. Furman and Starratt’s (2002) conceptualization of democratic community is applied to the government document to determine the extent that these principles are embodied in the document. The application of democratic community to the agenda is tempered and informed by research conducted by McKenna and Willms (1998) that summarizes the Canadian scene fully. The paper concludes with an assessment on the appropriateness of Furman and Starratt’s (2002) conceptualization of democratic community to the stated intent advanced by Manitoba K-S4 Education Agenda for Student Success (hereafter referred to as The Agenda) through a Canadian perspective.

Community
Murphy (2002) seeks to reculture the profession by three new metaphors of leadership: Moral steward, educator, and community builder that changes the profession’s compass from management to education. Murphy’s (2002), paradigm of democratic community reflects the prevalence of the phrase emerging in the literature covering educational administration. Drawing on the works of Dewey, Kahne, Crowe and Slater, Maxey, Reitzy and O’Hare, Rusch and Apple and Beane, as cited by Furman and Starratt (2002), four common themes in the literature regarding the character of democratic community are identified:

- Democratic community is based on open inquiry and the “full and free interplay of ideas” suggested by Dewey;
- Democratic community members work for the common good;
- In democratic community the rights of all, including the less powerful, are respected;
- Creating democratic community in schools is a systematic challenge, involving structures processes and curriculum. (p.106).

Furman and Starratt (2002) seek a clearer understanding of democratic community through two proposed conceptual problems: problematizing democracy and problematizing community. As noted by Furman and Starratt (2002), a significant portion of the work on community in the educational literatures cites Tönnies original work on the gemeinschaft/gesellschalt distinction:

“Tönnies delineated three types of community, gemeinschaft (all based on “sameness”
among the members: community of kinship (same family), community of place (same neighborhood), and community of mind (same values or lifestyle). Discussions of community in schools have reflected this “sameness” assumption by calling variously for shared values and visions” or “a sense of place” as a basis for community. (p.108).

As cited in Tönnies, (Furman and Starratt, 2002), work certainly has shaped Sergiovanni’s (1994) work — *Building Community in Schools*. While community is defined differently by social science disciplines - political science, sociology, geography, psychology and theology: Sergiovanni (1994) defines community as: ....“collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together binded to a set of shared ideas and ideals..... when describing community it is helpful to speak of community of kinship, of mind, of place, and of memory” (xvi).

While this community may exist in different forms, it is the relationships that are key in Sergiovanni’s view (1994). In explaining what is meant by community, Butcher (1993) identifies three distinct yet interrelated senses of community:

- **Descriptive community**: which draws on the words etymological origin of having *something in common*.
- **Community is value**: the existence of community is based on certain shared values, identified iby the principles of solidarity, participation and coherence.
- **Active community**: is based on the participation of community members in shaping community life.
The last insight of Butcher’s (1993) in explaining community requires a shared value base between community and policy makers. This shared value base is crucial to the formulation of structures, policies and practices that maintain and build on the active community. A message for developing such policies is community practice which comprises of three elements:

1. Community services approach - develop community - oriented towards to organizations and services.
2. Community development - promoting community self-help and empowerment;
3. Community action - campaigning for community interests and community policies.

(Glenn, 1993, p. 22-40).

Both perspectives however are problematic. In the first instance, the problem with the “sameness” assumption is out of sync with contemporary Western society and contemporary public schools are characterized by diversity. In Butcher’s conceptualization, schools lack experience, knowledge and the skills necessary to develop this sense of community (Leven and Riffel, 1999). Furman and Starratt (2002) define community within the context of post modern diversity as the “community of difference” or “otherness”. In addition to the problem in defining community, Furman and Starratt (2002) address the image of community as being isolated from the “outside”, The literature on professional communities, for example, amongst educators and students presents a rather narrow view of a school community (Furman and Starratt, 2002). A separate but still isolated view of school life and community literature addresses such linkages as “shared governance, coordinated services for children and parental involvement” (Furman and
The use of the term partnership is often used too loosely and all encompassing when, in fact, it is a continuum of relationships that exist between different sectors (business, civil society and government). Naidoo (2002) states that:

Minimally, there is intention (initial contact and explanation of potential relationships); beyond there is engagement (a more structured relationship including at least one pragmatic intervention). The most mature form of relationship, still relatively rare, is a full-fledged partnership (a reasonably formal, medium- or long-term relationship around a set of social desirables and goals). (p.27)

Drawing on research in the area of intersectoral engagement over the past decades, Naidoo (2002) states for progress to occur within certain social development goals, all parties must invest and contribute to schools. Here the key words associated with these new partnerships include clarity of vision and purpose, constant self regulation of the relationship, commitment, communication, consistency and change management (Naidoo, 2002). In his conclusion, Naidoo (2002) states that possibly the most important ingredient to successful partnerships is the candid assessment of issues by groups involved in the interaction.

Furman and Starratt (2002), frame community as:

... an understanding needs to be developed that within the diversity of the school population, all are interdependent in regard to achieving the common good of the school, the school and surrounding community are also interdependent — culturally and
economically — with the school being a key contributor to the community’s cultural capital and common good and that ultimately, all people and the school community to which they belong, are interdependent and interconnected in contributing to the common good of mankind. (p.111)

One receives the notion that the glue keeping a community together is based on the relationships and the interactions that people have. So in terms of the school we would look at interactions between teacher/student, teacher/parent/student, teacher/student/administration and the community, business people; all of these individuals and groups interact providing a vibrant community. In the words of Ryan and Bohlin (2000), they create the parameters of a mind set for community.

Like a city, a school is a “thing made”. It is a social construction and as such it can rise or fall. School communities are themselves microcosms of the city they inhabit. They too must be communities of virtue (Habit), built on a solid frame. This frame similar to a city’s moral and political architecture, arises from a school’s set of core beliefs and principles and it’s driving purpose or mission. These principles are either upheld in some way that a city upholds it’s laws ensuring order, safety and the equality of opportunity for its citizens or they are lost or thwarted in the face of competing priorities. When the members of a school community have ownership in core beliefs and principles and are committed to them - like the citizens of Crotona in the Bronx - there is a rebirth of learning and pride in the school. In contrast, when students, teachers and parents are cut off from what goes on in their school or are not invested in it, the moral life of the school begins to fall apart.
Communities of virtue are both made and sustained by the moral ethos of the school, by its distinctive climate or atmosphere. The word *ethos* is borrowed directly from the Greek and means “character, a person’s nature or dispositions”. An ethos of a school is a profound character educator. Discussions within the area of research on participative decision making, democratic community, ethos, represents an emerging paradigm both geographically as well as temporally. While not directly calling for an abandonment of school systems — questions are being raised vis a vis school improvement from a focus at the local site level and not a divisional or larger jurisdictional levels. (p. )

**Reconceptualization of Democracy**

The second problem, the - modern liberal view of democracy is still very much tied to the values of individual rights and self interest. This dated view of democracy is what Strike (1999) terms “thin democracy” which contrasts significantly with “thick democracy”. Furman and Starratt (2002) relate this democracy to the early twentieth century modern liberalism which is problematic for the “post modern context of diversity, fragmentation and trans-nationalism” (114).

Furman and Starratt (2002) agree with Maxcy (1995) that American public education has historically been dominated by democratic minimalism — teaching democracy in schools generally is abstract, there is a need to move from teaching about democracy to a practice of democracy.
Democratic Community

Democracy needs to incorporate the following values of “post modern liberalism” which adheres to a social morality (Furman and Starratt, 2002):

- The worst indignity of the individuals and the value of their participation;
- Reverence for free and open inquiry and critique;
- Responsibility of individuals to participate in open inquiry, collective choices and actions in the interest of the common good;
- The recognition that “post modern” democratic participation transcends understandings of democratic principles associated with specific nation states.

(p115)

Furman and Starratt (2002) see a convergence of the meanings of community and democracy through the lenses of diversity, societal fragmentation and globalization. They present the definition of democratic community as: processional and moral. “It is the enactment of participatory processes of open inquiry in working for the common good in regard to both local and global concerns; it is guided by a social morality that recognizes the worth of individuals and the social value of community (however temporal and provisional), celebrates difference and understands the ultimate and pragmatic interdependence of all”. (p.116)

Making Democratic Community Work

Schools that desire democratic community need to establish structures and procedures that allow for participation of all members of the school community in decisions and policies that affect them. In Furman and Starratt’s (2002) words:
“Recognizing the interdependence of school in the surrounding community and the assets that any community offers. These structures and procedures would include a variety of community members and be open to community initiated participation. Structural size becomes an important matter as school community advocates have long recognized since meaningful participation requires being heard in face to face meetings” (p.XX).

At the concrete level, students in a democratic classroom would work with teachers collaboratively planning and making decisions. “This kind of democratic planning at both the school and classroom levels is not the engineering of consent toward predetermined decisions that has often created the illusion of democracy, but a genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives” (Apple and Beane, 1995, p.9).

Similarly this view is advocated by Lickona (1989), through his book *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. School structures and schedules need to be adjusted so as to allow for such things as class meetings. Peterson (1995) with regard to democratic schools talks about parent involvement, governance, communication and meeting structures that require the attention of school leaders. In his words, “democratic participation requires the ability to listen, understand, empathize, negotiate, speak, debate and resolve conflicts in the spirit of interdependence and working for the common good” (p.118).

A fundamental process involved with the democratic community is how communication occurs and understanding is developed, particularly in cross cultural environments. During the past few decades, technology has woven a network of communication links on a world-wide
scale. One would think communication would be easier but there is a general feeling that communication is breaking down everywhere on a global scale (Bohm, 1999). A response to this concern is a communication practice that is transformative for those who engage in it, is called dialogue (Elliard and Gerard, 1998). The conceptualization of dialogue has been largely influenced by the visionary work of the late David Bohm, a quantum physicist and philosopher. In the field of education, Sidorkin, (1999) has advanced the concept of dialogue theory as it centers on understanding opposed to decision making. In Sidorkin’s (1999) words, the schools that effectively create community of difference are characterized through:

A good school is that with which students, parents and teachers are sincerely satisfied and which does not serve one group or class exclusively at the expense of others. This condition is at the heart of the contemporary issues around the notion of inclusion which in turn is the manifestation of the problem of difference.... the way a school handles the difference without exclusion to a large extent defines the character of the school.... in other words, people are happy in a school that is dialogical. In some way, whether a school is good has nothing to do with its organizational structure, curriculum and instruction... and so on. A school is good if your voice is included in that polyphonic act of assessing whether the school is good. (p.111)

Furman and Starratt (2002) conclude that for meaningful communication to occur democratic communities would attend to “continual training and practice in the skills of democratic deliberations and dialogue”. (p.119)
Democratic Community

Morality

In cultivating democratic deliberations and dialogue, (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988), a strong moral sense or ethos is required of “community interactions”. This moral sense has several facets or dimensions as implied through Furman and Starratt’s (2002) work:

- A social morality that values sociality itself, that is, that values coming together in the communicative spaces in which dialogue can occur in the interest of the common good;
- A reverence for open inquiry and critique within those common spaces, in pursuit of the common good;
- A respect for individuals and for the “assets” they bring to communities, with a view towards celebrating difference;
- A sense of responsibility that acknowledges the interdependence of all in achieving the common good. (p.120)

Furman and Starratt (2002) conclude that the basic purpose of a strong moral sense is not to marginalize other sets of values but through civility and collective action within diversity to achieve a democratic community. Furman and Starratt (2002) draw attention to the noticeable absence in the literature on curriculum and its role in promoting democratic communities.

Leadership

The lessons learned from democratic schools according to Apple and Beane (1995), are as follows:
The most powerful meaning of democracy is not created through political rhetoric but through daily interactions;
Everyone is meaningfully involved and organized around democratic social and pedagogic principles;
This movement is not entirely a break from traditional practice as being more socially and educationally responsive institutions, links with the progressive school reform movement successes of the past.

These lessons resonate with a morale commitment by educators to democratic community. Rusch’s (1998) research supports this idea but offers few strategies on how this commitment will enhance democratic community or how it will be achieved. Contrary to this notion would be Owens (2001) who views democratic decision making as non transferrable to educational organizations that are typically hierarchical. Regardless of structural features, practices and policies, leaders should not confuse organizing and managing participative decision making with democratic decision making. While participative decision making embraces a wide range of ways to include participants that may create true collaboration, Owens (2001) contends that no where in this process is the leader bound by a vote to subordinance - “in that sense, a school is not a democracy, at it’s best it is a participatory organization.” (p.289).

**Leadership Practices Connecting With Leadership Theory**

Furman and Starratt (2002) suggest a convergence of four leadership paradigms: Moral leadership, critical - humanist leadership, constructivist leadership and leadership as an art form.
Democratic Community

The interweaving of these paradigms create a conceptual view of democratic communities that “facilitates the construction of meaning of within diversity, aimed at the moral purpose of transforming schools into democratic communities” (Furman and Starratt, 2002, p.127). In considering democratic community as the centre for educational leadership, Furman and Starratt (2002) make these three claims:

- Democratic community is not “marginalizing” centre for the field because it is based on acceptance and appreciation of difference.
- Democratic community “recultures the profession” by focusing on what leadership is for — serving the common good in a multi-cultural society and world.
- Democratic community is the most appropriate focus for school leadership in a “post modern” world of diversity, fragmentation and cross nationalism. (p.129)

Garmston and Wellman (1999) call schools which develop collaborative faculties, satisfying relationships with communities and improved student achievement — adaptive. The adaptiveness of school/organization manifests itself through its flexible responses and interactions with changing environmental conditions (Garmston and Wellman, 1999, p.8). Beck and Foster (1999) grappled with the concept of educational community through the analysis of two divergent ways of explaining community: the liberal view and the communitarian. In the first conceptualization, individuals pursued their own self interest through maximum autonomy while in the second conceptualization it sees the privacy of communities in and for life. In their review of the literature, Beck and Foster (1999) summarized the sense of community of the
authors as a call for the creation of communities that are “heterocentric (not egocentric or individualistic)... based on the positive emotion of love (not fear), entail [ing] personal (not impersonal) social relations...[and seeking] the interests of the other (not exclusively of the self). In the view of these scholars such social systems promote human development. Within these communities there would be no fear of social catastrophe or hope of inordinate reward and friendship, fellowship, love and mutuality would flourish” (p.344).

**Schools and the Concept of Community**

Dewey’s vision of schools argued for the type of community described in the previous paragraph. This view has been largely uninfluential throughout the last century and has only recently emerged in educational literature as community relates to school. The history of schools and community have witnessed both the liberal/individualistic and communitarian assumptions of past educational efforts. Beck and Foster (1999) conclude that structures developed in the early part of the 20th Century America failed to create citizens who while maintaining individual identity are unified and equal in society. Schooling is seen as problematic for many students who are in environments characterized by diversity, complexity and fragmentation. To turn this state of affairs around, scholars (eg Merxz and Furman, 1997) call for creating a sense of community within schools. Researchers, governments, school officials talk about community but few operationalize the term community yet call for community. There seems to be though some underlying themes as to what is a commitment to community; three are noteworthy:

- Tolerance for ambiguity and imperfection (Lightfoot, 1984)
Activities that foster a sense of togetherness and belonging (Little, 1993; Grant 1988)

Quality of interactions among and between administrators, teachers and students (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988).

Related to this last set of behaviors that promote community, Kratzer (1996), Sergiovanni (1994) and Starratt (1994) document examples of an ethic of care. This ethic of care is not the result of a prescriptive list of successful behaviors but a mental set or paradigm for new interactive relations in the community of school. Other researchers have focused on the relationships between home and school, partnerships and coordinated services (Beck and Foster, 1999). Merxz and Furman’s (2002) *Community: Promises and Paradoxes* establishes three functions addressed by the school — community connections:

- Average to increased community control over schools through various site based management models
- Attempts to coordinate services and activities of outside agencies
- Activities established to engage parents in their children’s education.

Beck and Foster (1999) add a fourth strategy offered by Murphy (1996) which provides choice opportunities for parents and youngsters to join with “other like-minded people”. In it’s clearest form these opportunities would be schools of choice, voucher systems and other alternative programs where parents choose where educational dollars will go for educating their child. The challenge and opportunity that face educational leaders are summed up in Beck and
Foster’s (1999) closing remarks:

Essentially all these thinkers argued that a vital and healthy community is one that combines liberalisms, concern about individual with communitarian commitment to the creation of social systems built on mutual acceptance, care and respect. We argue that educational leaders who had learned from past and current efforts to develop schools that function as and in communities must embrace this way of thinking. They must balance “the competing demands of creating unified citizenry with equal rights as well as enabling each individual to achieve her or his potential”, never becoming so concerned with producing workers and citizens for today’s sake that they lose sight of the fact that society is composed of an exists for persons with a range of needs, wants, hopes and desires.

“The above mental set challenges traditional assumptions about educational community: As we have noted earlier, this belief that schools exist to serve society’s economic needs is in some ways reflective of communitarian ideals. Interestingly, the actual organizational structure of schools throughout much of this century seems more congruent with a liberal/individualist perspective... Ironically, the blending we have gotten seems to draw upon the worst of these two traditions.” (p.351)

All too often schools, driven by contracts, rules and structures to enforce them, seek to serve capitalism’s economic interest and lose sight of other ways to think about students, teachers and their families as individuals and as persons in community (Beck and Foster, 1999,
p.351). In arguing for teaching of history as a vehicle to improve democratic citizenship in schools, Osborne (1999) states that:

More fundamentally the attainment of democratic citizenship depends not only upon people learning how to exercise their rights and obligations but also upon institutional change. As the theorists such as Philip Reznik and Carol Pateman have suggested, we must extend our definition of democracy beyond the idea of representation to that of participation. One can imagine various ways of doing this but however it is done, we must begin to think in terms of participatory democracy if democratic citizenship is to become a reality. We must also extend the practice of democracy beyond the conventionally political sphere. There is something profoundly contradictory, for example, in the fact that the workplace where most people spend much of their lives remains one of the most authoritarian places in contemporary life. If participatory democracy is to become a reality, it will need an educational foundation. (pp.15-16)

In the second section of the paper, an assessment of The Agenda, as to how it contributes to the creation of democratic and moral communities in schools is undertaken. Parallel to the recent interest in democracy is the increase in educational writings of democratic community. In Manitoba where the government has created an educational agenda for student success (METY, 2002), democratic community is not mentioned. Of the six priorities identified, four are pertinent to this discussion. Priority 2: Strengthening links among schools, families and communities; Priority 3: Strengthening school planning and reporting and Priority 4: Improved
professional learning opportunities for educators: and Priority 6: Linking policy and practice to research and evidence. The fit between *The Agenda* and democratic community while not specified is clear. While the six priorities are interdependent, the four noted call for structures processes and practices that indirectly relate to the emerging literature on school improvement through some form of democratic community or at the very least some form of participatory decision making approach to school improvement. The rationale for the priorities is based on research, evidence on school improvement and student success (METY, 2002) specifically through strengthening links among schools, families and communities; strengthening planning and reporting, improving professional learning opportunities and lastly, linking policy and practice to research and evidence. The Agenda places significance on the need for schools to reach out to families so that the diverse needs of learners can be met. While The Agenda states much has been accomplished, increased demands are being placed on accessibility to programs and inclusiveness along with expanded opportunities. Even with these successes, concern remains that too many students are failing to achieve high enough levels of achievement to participate fully in the community (p.1). The need for an educated citizenry is fundamental: “we cannot allow large numbers of people to go through life without reasonable levels of education and credentials” (METY, 2002, p.1).

Specifically, Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, visible minorities and less educated adults are at educational levels that are in need of improvement. With a better educated and increasingly diverse population, greater demands are being placed on schools both through formal and informal pathways. More community groups are pressing for rural setting
Democratic Community

educational priorities, directions and participatory decision making processes. These combined factors necessitate changes in schools that can only be achieve through the participation of those directly involved in education and the broader community. In terms of The Agenda, the government’s role is to set the direction and bring people together — the real and lasting success requires the efforts of all.

The main resources we have to work with in education are the hearts and minds of those in and around our schools -- students, teachers, parents, staff, school board members and others in the community. Engaging people in a positive process should be done in ways respectful of everyone who participates. Educators and communities genuinely want our students to succeed. The challenge is to work together to find ways of increasing student success. That is what the Manitoba K-S4 Education Agenda for student success is about. (METY, 2002, p.2).

Philosophically, The Agenda uses terms like community, participation, decision making, positive process, engagement and genuinely to convey the importance of The Agenda for student success. These terms fit well with the current research literature on democratic community. While there is a good fit, promoting democratic community is not expressly the intent of the document. The tenor of the agenda is a call for improvement through greater participation through processes that are respectful and engaging.

**What the Research Tells Us**

Schools that are successful, according to the research, are student-centered, academically
rich and have a positive school climate fostering collegial interaction and have extensive staff
development. These schools demonstrate shared leadership and foster creative problem solving
involving parents and the community (METY, 2002, p.3). Through the research, the single
largest factor affecting the academic growth of student populations is effectiveness of individual
classroom teaching. Sighting Fullan’s (1993) work, effectiveness is enhanced through changes
in instructional practice and in the culture of the school that fosters strong collaborative
relationships among teachers, students, and other partners. Further student success is linked to
supports and involvement of the broader community: family and community involvement in
schools. Doaks and Lipton (1990) point to increased student achievement through the fostering
of a sense of community, equity and voice and through participation through partnerships. The
role of the home in supporting and improving a child’s development is critical and therefore
makes sense that improved communication between the home and school, increased parental
engagement, and others in the community can help through building capacity of schools. The
concluding comment in The Agenda (2002):

Community schools can affect not only educational outcomes but other outcomes as well,
such as improved social behavior and healthy youth development, better family
functioning and parental involvement, access to support services and enhanced school
climate, family and neighborhood life. (p.4)

Research on school effectiveness shows that schools achieve more when schools,
families and communities operate to create effective communities (Epstein, 1999). The demand
for greater influence and decision making in schools is offered through the school planning and reporting process where greater consultation and collaboration will enhance the capacity of the school. In order to fulfill the expectations of increased capacity, research methodology, data collection and evaluation strategies need to be rethought in light of school planning and the ability to implement ideas. The school plan is the unifying principle that engages parents, students, school staff and communities with the intention of changing school practices to improve student outcomes (METY, 2002, p.5). In terms of professional development as it pertains to this perspective on the Agenda, clearly the school is viewed as a community of learners adheres closely with an aspect of how community is approached in the educational literature (? , 20XX). Educational research efforts impact the whole community as in Elmor, Peterson and McCarthey’s (1996), view which creates shared inquiry. Results drive a process of continuous collection of data and analysis as they relate to measurable outcomes engaged through meaningful teamwork. Teamwork and time for teachers to work and reflect is called for as schools are called upon to build effective school communities.

In looking at the action items for each priority, the provincial government maintains a consultative process with the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils (MAPC) to develop effective communication strategies that engage parents in the education of their children. Further professional development sessions based on a needs assessment from stakeholder groups to be held for parents as to how parents and communities can increase their involvement is considered. Materials pertaining to conflict resolution, specifically in the area of curriculum, are
being developed through a resource guide that will answer commonly asked questions with supporting documents to follow.

Through Priority 3, schools are developing school plans which focus on improving student success and furthering the five other priorities. While Priority 4, Improving learning opportunities for educators, has been identified in this paper as following the literature in terms of community of learners, the phrase is not specifically mentioned in the four action strategies identified by the province. The action strategies, by and large, go to traditional modes of delivering professional development activities through creation of either web sites, identifying good practice and research and professional development activities offered by department consultants. New formats for professional activities through the web and lastly, through review of qualifications and credentials of teachers are seen as innovative.

The thrust within Priority 6 consists of four actionable items that call for the creation of a web site and links to key national and international research sites, partnerships in research ventures among universities, school divisions and schools; the sponsoring of educational research forums and symposiums, along with the annual evaluation of programs and policies through a consultative process. In addition, the department initiated review of the communications technology with the intention of facilitating collaboration among educators and the six priorities. The Agenda (2002) closes with the idea that this process in itself will be a learning one and that there is a commitment to an open dialogue with educational partners for the
express purpose of benefitting students, families and communities (p.17).

**Conclusion**

We now turn to the relevance of these developments for student success in schools within a Canadian and particularly a Manitoban context. McKenna and Willms’ (1998) national study on cooperation between families and schools situates the Canadian scene in a rather different view from that forwarded by Furman and Starratt (2002). McKenna and Willms’ (1998) view echoes that of Goodlad’s (1984) in that parents are less concerned with governance issues and more concerned with “intellectual development” and that school be a “nurturing, caring place” (pp. 61-62). Across Canada, McKenna and Willms’ (1998) study suggests that every provincial jurisdiction has implemented some type of vehicle for increasing parental involvement: the opportunity and training to participate in school decisions through home and school associations, advisory councils, advocacy groups and administrative information networks (p.20). Some reforms also aim at providing students with greater representation in the decision making process. These developments are occurring in a political environment that views parental, community and teacher participation as important to improving student success but without strong legislation. The strongest movement for Manitoba would be through school plans that are to incorporate community and school input, plans are to be submitted and reviewed by the Department of Education on an annual basis. Aside from these developments, a number of jurisdictions have employed Epsteins’ (1995) six types of parent-school involvement as frameworks for increasing student achievement. “It’s emphasis is on ‘what works’, but it also identifies barriers to increased cooperation and discusses issues concerning professional
autonomy of teachers and the goals of universal schooling in a democratic society” (McKenna and Willms, 1998, p. 20). It is through references to a democratic society that the issues of reform are discussed and really indirectly through an implied sense of the common good.

The Agenda reinforces the notion of how Canadians view parent/community roles in school improvements. Many barriers that constrain structures and processes are currently in place that historically have delivered a public education to large numbers of young people. McKenna and Willms (1998) view parents as having the greatest latitude in affecting day to day operations that are increasingly referred to as the culture of the school (Deal, 1999). Few direct references to promoting a democratic community are made in the literature and McKenna and Willms (1998) see the most important factors as teacher and principal involvement with parents.

Somewhere between the views of democratic community and home-school cooperation lies The Agenda which reflects the province’s values, political ideology, traditional practice and approach to the philosophy of education. Parental and community involvement have been closely identified as significant factors that can improve student success, the question remains the extent to which citizens desire to get involved in the process. The Agenda, while encouraging involvement, falls short of setting meaningful processes and structures in place that would effectively enhance parental and community involvement. Support for the priorities remains with historical structures within a legislated framework where real power is invested with the elected officials of the school board. For student success to be realized, the school is the pivotal piece in the relationship within the Manitoba example; it is removed from participation of
a democratic community but through a form of participatory decision making within a democratically elected political arena. Creating a more participatory relationship in the pursuit of the democratic ideal will require far more thought, energy and commitment in terms of altering existing laws, policy and relationships, than is currently put forth by The Agenda.
References


