

# How to Organize Successful Parent Advisory Committees

Working together on site councils, school staff, parents, other community members, and students can create better schools.

Site councils of school staff, parents, other community members, and students can dramatically improve education. I reached this conclusion after having established and then worked with such councils as a principal in four schools—a K-12 experimental school, a magnet high school, a traditional junior high, and a private school for the arts.

Of course, site councils do not automatically endow school success. If they are mishandled, serious problems can result. Nonetheless, dynamic home-school-community partnerships established through site councils can result in improved schools that better serve their communities.

## Shared Decision Making

When a district decentralizes decisions to school sites, a crucial issue arises: who will participate in making those decisions? It is possible, of course, that the principal alone will decide budget, staffing, and curriculum matters. It is also possible that shared decision making will mean principals and teachers together make the decisions. However, others vying for a role in decision making include nonprofessional staff, parents, other community members, and students.

These stakeholders may not be standing in line, so accustomed are they to being left out, but it is a serious mistake to omit them. Stakeholder involvement promises creativity, re-

sourcefulness, and ingenuity, and shared decision making engages and affirms people. It challenges them to contribute their energy and ideas. People at the heart of a problem, if they

VI. TERMS OF MEMBERS AND OFFICERS  
Members shall serve staggered three year terms from September to September with the election of officers occurring at the October meeting. The first group of members shall draw lot for one, two or three year terms to increase over to equal membership of the Council.

VII. VACANCIES  
Vacancies in office positions shall be filled by election from the Council. Vacancies in membership positions are appointed from the ranks of alternate members of community members. A petition shall be presented at the next meeting of community members within an adequate explanation given to the Council. The Council shall rule on what constitutes an adequate explanation.

III. MEMBERSHIP  
Membership in the Council shall be comprised of three students, at least one of whom is a representative of the official student government; three parents, three other community members; three staff members (including the principal), with a Superintendent of Schools designee as an ex officio member. An alternate representative shall have one vote and is to be selected for each representative. The Council's membership shall reflect the various age, sex, and racial groups which comprise the school. Alternates are entitled to vote in the absence of their representative. Students, parents, and staff are to select their own representatives to the Council. The procedure is to include: 1) notification of each group concerning the candidates, 2) presentation of information to each group concerning the representatives, 3) solicitation and recruiting of representatives, 4) providing information to each group concerning the manner of selection of community members shall be determined by the Council but shall include an open period in which people can express their interest.

IV. OFFICERS  
Officers shall be elected by the Council from its membership to serve annual terms for the offices of President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The President shall appoint committee members, call and chair meetings, and serve as the chief spokesperson for the Council. The Vice President shall assist the President and shall preside in the absence of the President. The Treasurer shall maintain records of monies. The Secretary shall take the minutes of the meetings and provide members with a report of the proceedings.

V. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE  
The officers and the principal shall constitute the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee shall meet at the next meeting of the Council.

I. NAME  
The name of this organization shall be The \_\_\_\_\_ School Council, herein called the Council.

II. PURPOSE  
The Council's purpose is to promote effective education policy for \_\_\_\_\_ School with special attention to the areas of curriculum, teaching methods, staffing, evaluation, integration planning, community involvement, home-school collaboration, lump sum budgeting, and obtaining resources. The Council provides a forum for participation of parents, students, staff and other community members in decisions and recommendations for action. The Council operates within the policies and recommendations of the Board of Education of the \_\_\_\_\_ Public Schools, except as waivers have been granted.

CONSTITUTION

VI. MEMBERSHIP

VII. VACANCIES

VIII. OFFICERS

IX. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

control resources, will find a way to solve it.

As stakeholders, parents bring essentially one item to the school agenda: they want a good education for their children! They cling tenaciously to this point. This very persistence accounts for much of the speed of educational progress in schools where parents have a prestigious role on site management councils.

Further, it is of paramount importance that parents on the council represent the diversity of the student body. A council composed only of parents of academically high-performing students may overlook, indeed, not even think of, the needs of other types of students, thereby failing to address curriculum issues that enable all students to succeed.

While parents focus on school achievement in the broadest sense, educators bring many items to the table. Some wish to preserve traditional programs. For example, they may continue to emphasize a college-bound curriculum in a community that now includes few college-bound students. Some teachers and administrators may not be interested in parental interaction, after-school programs, open houses for the community, multi-cultural/gender fair experiences, and personal accountability for student performance. Entrenched attitudes or practices in schools are resistant to change, and parents can help to identify and eventually consign such resistance away from their children and their school.

**Shared decision making engages and affirms people.**

## Educating Parents for a Larger Role in School Improvement

Kenneth Silvestri

**Schoolwatch**—a statewide coalition of New Jersey civic, religious, business, and advocacy groups committed to improving urban education—organized the Public Policy and Public Schools Program in 1982 to help parents define their role in school improvement efforts. Since 1977, Schoolwatch has worked for greater involvement of parents and citizens at both local and state levels through varied forms of shared decision making in policy areas.

The coalition began this new program with funding from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation and obtained approval of the curriculum for college credit through the American Council on Education in the fields of education, communications, and political science. The program was piloted in Paterson, with 30 weekly sessions. Parents who were involved with PTAs, school-community relations, and district basic skills advisory councils made up the first training group. The prerequisite for participation was a commitment to attend the classes and take part in the activities. Of the 30 participants, 25 "graduated," and many engaged in local school and districtwide projects to improve the quality of education. The course also won high praise from leading state and local education advocates and officials.

Since then, the course has become the main activity of the New Jersey Institute for Citizen Involvement in Education. It has been condensed to 24 sessions (6 credits), and it is now offered in 12 cities. Sessions are designed to enable parents to understand the administration, curriculum, and organization of public schooling. The objective is to produce a well-informed network of citizens who can assume an active role in improving their schools. Each class consists of a presentation on a pertinent topic, a guest speaker (usually a district person who works in an area relevant to the topic), a film, and a group exercise/simulation game. The dynamics are informal yet rigorous; over 30 books and articles are used (for example, John Goodlad's *A Place Called School*, TheodoreSizer's *Horace's Compromise*, and Ernest Boyer's *High School*). The curriculum (authored by Norm Fruchter and Kenneth Silvestri) evolves into a continuous map of how the schools function. The simulations exemplify existing points of view and are set in the framework of relevant contexts (for example, board members deciding on a gifted program, a parent committee looking at special education referrals, or teachers developing a mastery learning program). A final project consists of developing a local school improvement plan based on the work of such authors as David Seeley and Carl Marburger.

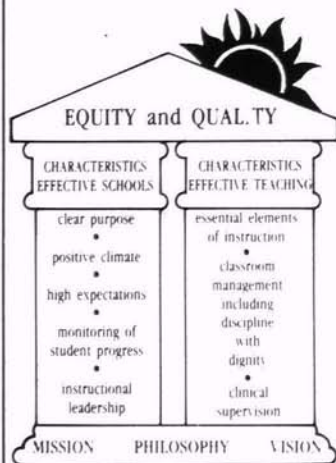
Since the program began, nearly 90 percent of the participants have completed it, bringing the number of graduates to more than 500. Annual graduation ceremonies at Rutgers University are a highlight of the program, instilling a strong sense of purpose as well as camaraderie among the graduates. While the number of graduates attests to the program's success, even more noteworthy are the graduates who have won seats on local boards of education, become active members of local school committees and advocacy groups, or initiated local support groups. More than 50 graduates have enrolled in traditional colleges, and many also help identify potential candidates for the program.

The Public Policy and Public Schools Program is a dynamic avenue for parent involvement in New Jersey, and its goal of becoming an integral part of school improvement is becoming a reality. For more information about the program, contact the New Jersey Institute for Citizen Involvement in Education, c/o Rutgers University, Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ 08903.

**Kenneth Silvestri** is a Family Therapist/Educational Consultant, 51 S. Park St., Montclair, NJ 07042.



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### Membership

All stakeholders are necessary to complete the equation for school improvement. Membership on site councils should encompass parents, students, teachers, support staff, principal, and other community people. To attain council members representative of the community's diversity, though, a school must devote time and energy. This may mean recruitment. It is not satisfactory to say, "We tried, but they were not interested." To ensure a healthier, fairer school community, members must be sought from under-represented groups.

In elementary schools, parents should stand in for students because meetings involve too much talk and are too long for young children. But it is wise to include youth, say, age 12 and older. I have seen young people assume extraordinary roles on councils. They have generated exciting possibilities, spoken up for less fortunate or less articulate students, and provided an unbiased assessment of schooling.

Community members represent society's interests as a whole. Their participation at meetings represents the views of the 80 percent of the community without children in schools—certainly a critically important voice to hear.

A good size for a council is 9 to 18 members. Fewer than 9 can mean too few of any group to adequately represent a range of opinions. More than 20 becomes unwieldy and expensive. A typical membership roster includes: 4 students, 4 parents, 4 staff, 1-2 community members (not school parents) and the principal as ex officio.

Councils can elect or select their representatives from people who volunteer to serve or from people recruited. The existing council can supervise the process of replacing its members. Some members should continue on overlapping terms.

### Orientation

Council members will be better prepared and feel more comfortable if provided an orientation about their role and function. Suggested topics for a training session include council role

and authority, purpose, district organization, value and functions of committees, decision making (might include a mini-lesson on motions and Robert's Rules of Order) or consensus decision making, team building, how to disagree and the value of expressing a different view, expectations of membership, resources, and council structure. At the training session, I like to give each member a three-ring binder containing the information covered for future reference.

Too often, in the haste to get going, organizers omit training or orientation, resulting in frustration for many members. Members need to understand the basics for creating a soundly functioning council. A thorough grounding from the start pays dividends and saves time over the year.

**Parents bring essentially one item to the school agenda: they want a good education for their children!**

## Constitution

I have heard people say, "Why bother with a constitution? It's too formal and not really necessary." This view results from (1) misunderstanding a constitution's purpose, and (2) not realizing the seriousness of what is at stake for all parties.

A constitution spells out the purpose of the council; for example, to decide about staffing, budget, curriculum, policy, and program evaluation. It also states the council's purview; membership makeup; and the number of members in each category of staff, parents, students, and other community people. This elevates those members' positions and avoids packing a meeting with votes when a hot issue comes up.

We're not talking anymore of parents tolerated at the traditional parents' tea. We're talking school change and school improvement. People's careers and working patterns are at stake, and you don't treat that casually. You must specify orderly procedures. Sometimes people want to take over, get publicity, or grind an axe. A constitution provides for checks and balances just as parliamentary procedure ensures that all have an equal opportunity to participate in decisions. And a constitution ensures proper elections.

Aside from voting membership, meetings should be open to all with as much informality as possible. People sometimes forget that parliamentary procedure and constitutional provisions are meant to serve them, not the other way around.

## Working Together

Bringing educators, parents, other community members, and students to the decision-making table results in less blaming and finger-pointing and more genuine problem-solving behavior by all parties. Otherwise, it is too easy for parents to blame teachers or for teachers to blame parents, and for community members and students to feel left out of decisions. Each group brings a distinct voice to the dialogue about school improvement. The solution is to work together, sharing problems and solutions while recognizing and supporting each other's best ef-

## The solution is to work together, sharing problems and solutions while recognizing and supporting each other's best efforts and intentions.

forts and intentions. Decentralized and shared decision making is a powerful tool for improving schools. There is virtually no limit to what can be accomplished by harnessing the

energy of committed people to a task. □

### Resources

- Institute for Responsive Education, 704 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215. The institute focuses its efforts on how parents can be involved in their schools; it produces several publications.
- The National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 301, 10840 Little Patuxent Pkwy., Columbia, MD 21044. They have publications about parental involvement and recently published *School-Based Improvement* by B. J. Hansen and C. L. Marburger (1988).
- Rosaler, J. (1979). *How to Make the Best School Site Council in the World: A Guidebook for School Improvement Councils and Other School-Community Groups*. Sacramento: California State Department of Education.

**Wayne B. Jennings** is President, Designs For Learning, 449 Desnoyer, St. Paul, MN 55104.



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