

## Decisionmakers, Policymakers, Advisors

### Parent-Owners Participate in School Governance

Recently, the New York City Public School system announced a plan to set up decision-making councils at each of the city's more than 1,100 schools. These teams—half of whom are school personnel and the other half parents, students, and community members—would have broad authority on issues including school budget, curriculum, and professional development. The district's argument: you can't improve schools without the participation of local communities in their children's education.

PPS—like more and more school districts around the country—understands that parents and community members must play substantive, proactive roles in public education. In particular, PPS believes that parents deserve a place not only at the homework table, but at the policy- and decision-making tables of schools and districts, as well.

We also understand that good policy—like New York's site council plan—is a good first step, but not enough. Too often, these ideas for substantive parent involvement falter. Parents may not be truly welcomed into the process. Or they are not prepared with the information or training they need to participate as effective partners in decision-making. If implemented improperly, well-intentioned policies may even backfire, suggesting to educators that parents are unable to play important roles in policy-making.

This issue of *Parent Press* is devoted to the range of ways parents around the country are taking up governance roles. Whether participating on school site councils, serving on district-wide committees or task forces, or seeking election to school boards (see, page 2), parents in PPS chapters are finding ways to get their voices heard. They are making sure that public schools are doing what is necessary to improve student achievement in their communities. And they are working to ensure that parents get the support needed to become a powerful force in the decision- and policy-making process.

#### Taking the District to Task

One of the parent involvement innovations PPS has developed for this kind of work is the district-wide task force. Comprised of parent liaisons or representatives from each school in a district, the task force meets regularly (sometimes even weekly)

with the superintendent and other district-level personnel. The goal is to identify and study systemic, persistent problems and make specific suggestions about immediate and long-term solutions.

The Jackson, MS, Task Force for Accelerating School Improvement has used this model to address issues such as overcrowd-

Special Education Task Force and an ad hoc group on charter schools now permitted under new state legislation. In addition, PPS serves on the district's Parent-Community Oversight Committee, which is charged with overseeing the implementation of the district's strategic plan.

others appointed by principals. All face a variety of challenges.

In some places, chapters report, principals do not effectively delegate responsibility to the council, or they simply appoint a group of rubber-stamp supporters. Elsewhere, parents' impact is limited by their lack of connection to other parents in the

school or community. Virtually all parents require some kind of training so they can discuss the complexities of budget, curriculum and other issues that arise (See stories on Waco, TX, and Macon, GA, PPS Chapters, page 4).

"Our biggest concern with site-based groups," says **Kelly Butler**, PPS Executive Director, "is that parents

have to be equipped to handle the complexity of the discussion. Parents should be raising the tough issues that matter to student achievement, but they also need help in knowing how to do this."

#### Getting a Respected Space at the Table

Whether parents serve on a site-based council or district committee, all of these kinds of efforts are hard work. PPS chapters and parents around the country face serious obstacles as they attempt proactive involvement in decision- and policy-making. Despite the strong rhetoric and actions of some districts, the big-

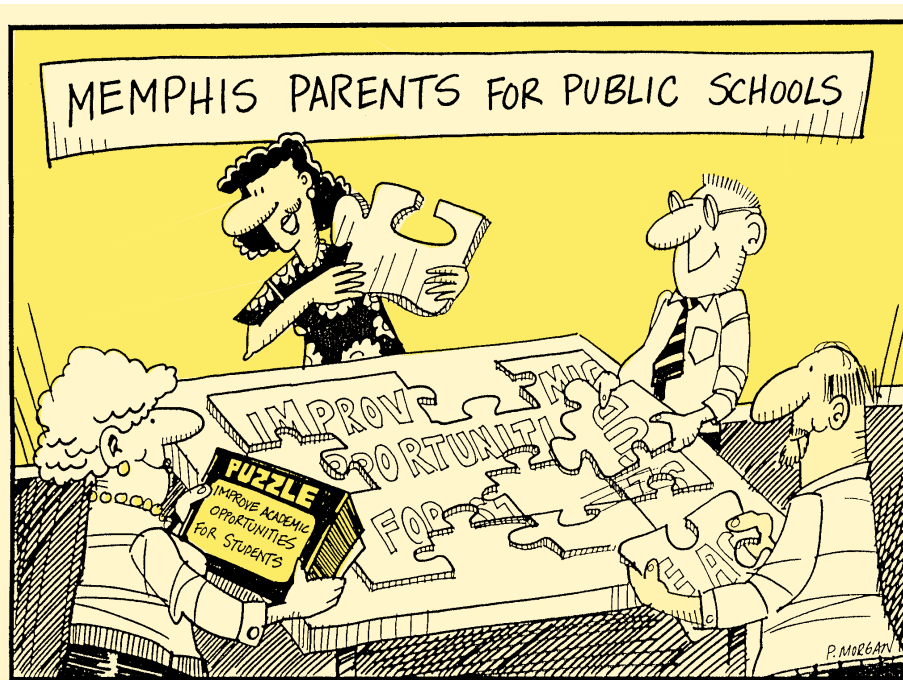
gest barrier to this kind of active involvement is often administrators and educators, themselves.

School personnel generally support parent participation, as long as parents serve in traditional volunteer roles or act as boosters for school policies and actions. When parents speak out or challenge the status quo, however, they are often ignored or rebuffed.

"A central aspect of our chapters' work," says Butler, "is to create a school environment where parents' active participation in all levels of decision-making is respected and encouraged. In this kind of school environment, parents can act and speak forcefully on behalf of all students, not just their own; and districts are likely to respond."

Once there is a genuine opportunity to participate in the conversations around school improvement, parents must then develop a level of knowledge that allows them to make an informed contribution. This includes an understanding of the budgeting process, school and district policy, accountability systems—whatever is on the table. Recently, PPS has taken on this challenge and is in the process of working with various chapters to develop training resources for parents. These kinds of resources, PPS believes, will help to level the playing field and let parents participate on an equal footing with school personnel.

In bigger districts, the complexity of the system requires an additional level of knowledge. "Sometimes, the decision-making process is not at all clear," says **Mary Filardo of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Education Fund**, which works to improve schools in the District of Columbia. "Who is, in fact, making the decisions and when? How can



A recent cartoon appearing in *The Richmond Review* aptly depicts *Memphis, Michigan Parents for Public Schools* members as problem solvers and decision makers. Reprinted with permission, 1998.

ing, teacher quality, disintegrating facilities, and the need for an alternative school. Earlier this year, the Mississippi State Legislature approved \$30 million in additional spending for the district. In a huge vote of confidence, the superintendent asked the PPS Task Force to create a priority plan for the funds. Not only did the Task Force identify several strategies to improve teacher quality and academic excellence, it will also play a role in ensuring that the plan is implemented successfully.

#### Joining the Policy-Making Process

While several PPS chapters use the Task Force model, others interact with their districts in different ways. They attend local board meetings and make sure that parents have the time and space to regularly voice their concerns and participate in policy debates (see box, page 3). When board elections come around, they hold candidate forums so that parents and community members can be informed. They work with administrators to ensure seats for parents on district-wide advisory committees.

In Cincinnati, PPS members participate on a variety of such committees, including the district's

"We've been able to push our way to the table," says **Cincinnati Chapter President Margaret Hulbert**. "Our challenge now is not how do we get a voice, but how do we get the voices of more parents, particularly those not usually at the table, heard."

#### Site-based Management

School site councils, campus decision-making committees, local school councils—these vehicles for site-based management provide another common way PPS parents can play an important role in school governance. These councils vary in scope, size and responsibility. Some are elected,

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## Letter from the Executive Director

Woodrow Wilson said it first. "As parents, we are the owners of the public school system....School improvement depends on our participation."

The grassroots PPS experience provides important lessons about what it means for parents to act—and to be received—as “owners” of their public schools. While parent involvement is a popular notion, this posture of ownership is not welcomed everywhere. Many districts, accustomed to passive, unquestioning parents, are slow to view us as equal participants, let alone owners.

Because our focus at the district level is outside the old paradigm of “appropriate” parent involvement, chapters spend a considerable amount of time just paving the way to demonstrate the possibilities of this new form of participation. This



often means speaking up without being threatening, as well as spending a lot of individual time learning the issues and the system in order to participate effectively. This work is time-consuming and labor intensive. Often it results in serious burnout, just as parents are getting a place at the table. Our own table, really.

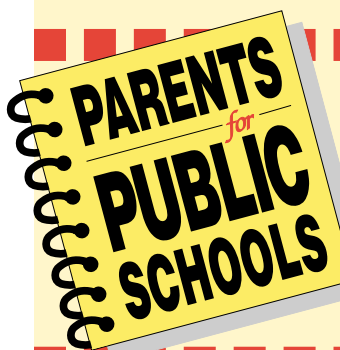
Standing against entrenched bureaucracies, while standing up for public education, is exhausting work. It's pretty clear, even without a lot of research, that this mode of “just wait them out” is how the status quo prevails.

The Parents for Public Schools chapter model offers a structure for parents to stay the course in spite of the roadblocks and shifting political forces that either paralyze or drive district policy. PPS encourages its chapters to participate in decision-making at all levels in a district. Our goal is to equip more and more parents to be willing and able to take on a kind of involvement that leads to better student achievement.

PPS chapters are critical to this work. They establish effective mechanisms for participation, prepare parents to join the discussion, and set a new expectation for parent involvement in district decision- and policy-making. As Wilson pointed out decades ago, this kind of involvement is critical to helping public schools fulfill their educational and civic potential.

*Kelly Allin Butler, PPS Executive Director*

“Parents should be raising the tough issues that matter to student achievement,...”



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## Parents on Board

### Making an “Official” Impact

At PPS, we believe all public school parents have the right to speak out and advocate for needed changes. At the district level, however, parents are not always seen as legitimate voices. In some places, they are even viewed as hostile “outsiders.” To fight this perception, some parents (and some PPS members) seek official governance roles, winning election to positions on the local school board, for instance.

Board membership has obvious advantages. Most importantly, board members can highlight the importance of parents’ views and participation in school governance. They can run (and in the best cases facilitate) important discussions so that parents receive a sympathetic hearing. And as elected officials and parents, they themselves play a critical role in creating a vision for the district, hiring and firing the superintendent, setting financial or budget priorities and developing a wide range of school policy.

Challenges come along with the job, too. As a single official among a group of five or eight or 10, a board member may have less “parental” impact than he or she initially hoped. For PPS members, it can sometimes mean supporting the system longer than usual, in hopes that the system can be made to work.

“As a PPS chapter member, I was often less patient,” says **Paul Reams, former president of PPS of Macon**, and now a parent board member in Bibb County, GA. “I tended to go straight to

the superintendent and raise Cain!” As a board member, he notes, he now tries to make sure a parent with a problem gets a proper hearing first from the teacher involved, the principal, and on up the line to the superintendent. “I need to first try to allow the system to function,” he says.

Whatever the difficulties, parent

board representation remains crucial. “I think it is tremendously important for the morale of a community,” says **Josh Wiener**, a PPS leader who served on the Jackson, MS, school board between 1995 and 1997. “I don’t think public education can really work or be successful if parents in the community are not part of the ultimate governance.”



**NEW HEADQUARTERS**—The National Board gathered in October at Parents for Public Schools’ new National Headquarters. The National Office and “mother chapter” share a home in Jackson, Mississippi.



**NEW CHAPTER**—Welcome, PPS of Portland, Oregon! Shown here at PPS’s leadership conference are Linda Blaydon-Olson and Marianne Fitzgerald.

*Continued from Front Page:*

your input be timely and relevant to decision-makers.” Even if it is not immediately visible, there is generally a decision-making process. “Part of your job,” says Filardo, “may be to get district folks to articulate the process.”

Confusion over the role of parents in this work can also undermine their participation. Educators have the primary professional responsibility for managing the schools and their operations. Parents have a role in school governance, sharing in the decisions that affect schools. Both sides must respect each other’s function. And despite what some educators say, shared decision-making does not mean that the professionals make all the decisions and then share them with parents and others.

The final challenge is developing the political power and sustainability necessary to impact decisions. Parents must find ways to draw on the views and support of other parents and the broader community. This is the role a PPS chapter can play, and it is these connections that add weight to a chapter’s voice in the policy-making process. Importantly, this work must be main-

tained over time. Intransigent or insensitive administrators too often attempt to wait parents out, relying on the time and financial pressures to discourage parents from maintaining an effective presence.

### The Distinctive Voice of Parents

Despite these challenges, parent involvement in decision-making and governance remains critically important to school improvement. **Don Davies, PPS board member and founder of the Institute for Responsive Education**, a Boston, MA education organization that promotes family and community involvement in schools, points to several reasons parents are needed in any school or district decision-making process:

- Parents know things about their own child and other children that inform decisions that a district faces.

- Parents carry the “parent view” of what schools are doing and what they should be doing. This perspective needs to be included in the decision-making process.

- Parents give the process credibility, which is important politically. Their presence gives



*Mary Filardo*

decisions additional strength beyond what principals or the superintendent or the school board says.

- Parents bring the perspective of their own segment of the community, whether that means Haitian immigrant mothers or upper-middle class fathers or something else. This diversity of views is often missed.

This broad community representation ensures that decisions are in the hands of a group of people who are diverse by race, class, job or function, a group that is as representative of the interests of all children as possible. This does not always guarantee perfect decisions and a tidy process, says Davies. “But I believe it makes it more likely that the group will make more interesting and better, child-centered choices.”

# PPS Tool Box

## PARENTS AS PROBLEM SOLVERS ACTION GUIDE AVAILABLE TO PPS CHAPTERS!

### Instructions for setting up a District-Level Task Force to Accelerate School Improvement

- Includes 20-step action plan for establishing and running a Task Force in your district.
- Provides framework for establishing priorities.
- Sets out guidelines for building consensus.

Call 1/800-880-1222. Ask for Task Force Action Guide.

## What's Going On?

### Tips for Monitoring Your School Board

1. Assemble a cadre of chapter members interested in undertaking this important function. Have these "school board liaisons" meet to agree on a calendar of assignments.
2. Determine your district's procedures for providing advanced copies and materials related to the board agenda and other public meetings. Request that advance copies be provided to your chapter.
3. Take a set of chapter goals and priorities with you to every board meeting. If an agenda is available in advance, be prepared to raise questions as they relate to the work of the chapter and to improving achievement for all students.
4. Keep notes of issues discussed by the board and report back to the chapter, either through a written report, summary in the chapter newsletter, special mailings, and/or monthly meetings of the chapter. This is an important step because what the Board does needs to inform chapter actions.
5. Schedule a formal presentation to your local board regarding your work as a PPS chapter. This presentation should be preceded by a planning session of the chapter's leadership utilizing input from a broad base of public school parents in your district.
6. Cultivate good relationships with individual members of the board. This may be done one-on-one or by inviting an individual board member to attend a PPS executive meeting. Also become familiar with the players at the district level responsible for important information and data.

## Expect the Best

### Questions for Assessing (and Assisting) Your School Board

- Does the board have a vision for your district with clearly articulated goals?
- Do all of its decisions/deliberations directly relate to improving teaching and learning?
- What are the overarching themes that consume the board's attention? Do they focus on the adults in the system or the children?
- Is the board involved in big picture issues of your district or does it tend to micro-manage?
- Does the board have confidence in and a good working relationship with district personnel?
- Does the district provide necessary data—in a usable form—to enhance board decision-making?
- Does the board ask for relevant data in order to make effective decisions?
- How are parents involved in issues and decisions *before* the board takes action? What is your chapter doing to ensure parent involvement at all levels? How does your chapter ensure that the voices of all parents are heard?
- How does the board demonstrate its commitment to equity and excellence?
- Is progress being made fast enough to resolve problems that affect the quality of education in every classroom? Could your PPS chapter take on some of these challenges to assist the board in taking

**WHERE ARE YOU ON THIS PROPOSAL?** The facilitator asks individuals to react to the proposal by raising the number of fingers that correspond to their position.



**0** No. I need an alternative I can support.



**1** I can't support it at this time. I need more information.



**2** I'm not sure. I need more discussion.



**3** I'm not sure but I'm willing to trust the group's opinion.



**4** I'm for the idea. I can provide support.



**5** I'm all for the idea. I can be a leader.

## Steps to Building Consensus

### (and some ideas of what to do if there's no consensus)

The effectiveness of site councils, district committees and other decision-making groups often depends on their ability to generate consensus among their members. Here are some ideas on building consensus from the *Team-Building Toolkit*, available through the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), (800) 727-7288. When seeking agreement on a difficult decision or issue, groups should do the following:

- Discuss the topic, raise questions and concerns, present data and options for solutions
- Decide whether consensus is appropriate for this decision, how much time will be needed, and what to do if consensus is not achieved
- Explore differences and similarities, agreements and disagreements
- Make suggestions and modifications on proposed solutions
- Generate a new solution based on the discussion
- Poll each member of the group to ensure all agree and are willing to actively support the decision

If the polling reveals a lack of consensus, the group should seek an alternative position. The facilitator might then ask some of the following questions of the people who oppose the original position:

- Under what conditions would you support this solution?
- What parts of the solution do you oppose?
- What parts of the solution would you modify to be more comfortable with the solution?

- What would be necessary for you to agree with this solution?
- Would you be willing to live with the solution for a limited time?

And the facilitator might ask team members who support the recommendation:

- What are you willing to do to adjust your views to respond to the discontent of those people who are not in agreement?
- If you were not in agreement, what parts of the solution might trouble you?

And if these questions don't get you there, here are some options from NSDC's *School Improvement Manual*:

- Create a compromise position and ask everyone to react to it
- Provide private "think time" and begin discussion again
- Leave the issue and return to it later
- Organize small groups to reach consensus and begin the large group discussion again
- Create a contradictory statement to refocus the discussion and identify deeper, unarticulated concerns
- Choose another facilitator

# Ear to the Ground

Several PPS chapters are doing exciting work focused on improving the role of parents in the governance and decision-making of public schools. Here are three reports, as well as contact numbers of chapter leaders, if you are interested in getting more information.



Eileen Berger

## Ellenville, NY

Almost since its inception, PPS of Ellenville, NY, has enjoyed a positive and productive relationship with the school district. Ensclosed in a cooperative working environment, the chapter continues to make important contributions to district policies and actions. As part of the chapter's regular activities, members attend and speak at school board meetings. This year, the chapter has also focused on strengthening the role of parents and community members on the district's building level teams (site councils).

"PPS has representation on each team, and its presence," says **chapter President Eileen Berger**, "has really stirred things up." Due to PPS's influence, she notes a commitment to more professionalized meetings and a balky willingness to consider

meeting times more convenient to parent and community members' schedules.

In some cases, there has also been a renewed focus on teaching and learning. For example, the Ellenville superintendent asked the Middle School Building Level Team for input into strategies designed to boost student academic success. The team suggested hiring more teachers to reduce class size, teacher training on effective study skills, a peer tutoring program for students, increased access to the library media center and its computer labs, and a partnership with the local library.

The superintendent took these ideas to a forum on middle school issues in Albany, the state capital, where he also sought funding for their implementation. "It's taken a little while to get things moving," says Berger, "but we are starting to make a real difference on these teams."

(Contact: Eileen Berger (914) 647-7610)



Waco's Kris Olson at PPS's Giant Bulletin Board, illustrating national media coverage of PPS chapters across the country.

## Waco, TX

While the Waco chapter is working on a variety of governance and policy fronts, it has spent

considerable time thinking and acting around parent participation on the site-based decision-making councils mandated by Texas law.

Recently, the chapter has worked with the local school board to mandate an additional parent on these 17+-member councils, upping the number of parents to a minimum of four per school. It has also played an oversight role, identifying schools where the principal has been slow to appoint the council and ensuring that councils are active on each school site.

Teaming with PPS National, the Waco chapter has been developing materials to help train parent representatives on site-based councils, as well. "We've found that parents are easily intimidated by the data necessary to make decisions until they are shown how to use the data appropriately," says **Kris Olson of PPS Waco**.

The Waco chapter, therefore, is providing a "questionnaire-

guide" for all parent council representatives that covers the range of school concerns from facilities to academic environment to com-

pliance. Answering the guide's questions provides a mechanism for parents to gather the information they need to get up to speed. Principals will also receive the guide, so they can either provide answers directly or at least be prepared for parents seeking the information. In addition, principals will get a model notebook, which they can adapt and distribute, outlining the kinds of data and resources parent and other committee members need.

"I believe principals need continued training on site-based councils—how the strengths of the group members and the varied perspectives can be best utilized to improve student learning," says Olson. They need to understand that "the best way to achieve a high degree of shared decision-making is to train an entire team on an ongoing basis."

Waco has also developed a "cheat sheet," or glossary of definitions, to help parents and community members understand budgets, and they are working with the district to compile a calendar of decisions that a council is responsible for each year. These and other documents can be included in the council notebook and are part of a larger tool kit PPS National plans to complete by early next year.

(Contact: Kris Olson: (254) 756-2505)

## Macon, GA

The Bibb County, GA, Public School District enjoys positive parent support through its local PPS chapter of Macon, GA. Several PPS members have also served on the local school board. As a result of PPS's influence at the district level, the school board initiated specific policies designed to strengthen site-based management in Bibb County's public schools. In turn, PPS is

taking the lead in providing training to parents and other team members so they can participate more effectively. In fact, a pilot project is about to be launched in Macon to build a governance training module for use across the PPS network.

Through this pilot, PPS of Macon will develop a structure and process for bringing parents to a new level of involvement at the district and equipping them to



Paul Reams

undertake substantive issues that address improving student achievement. The project will yield a "governance curriculum" that parent leaders in a district can use to train other parents and build effective decision-making teams.

The process will educate and challenge parents to ask important questions relative to student achievement, push districts to provide and look candidly at data, and support parents' role in the development of school improvement plans. The goal is to establish a model that can help parents breathe life into site-governance policies that look good on paper, but too often aren't taken seriously by districts, school boards and building principals.

(Contact: Paul Reams, (912) 746-6817)

# Profiles in Governance

Parents for Public Schools and its local chapters continually seek and test new ideas that help parents take more active roles in their local school districts. While we work in more than 50 communities around the country, we are also joined by kindred spirits in other places. Like PPS chapters, these groups are developing strategies that make a difference in district- and school-wide policies, strategies that make sense given their local realities. Here, we present brief profiles of programs in two large urban districts. PPS salutes these parents who are doing this tough and important work.

## MOM Knows Best Mothers on the Move, The Bronx, NY

Since 1992, Mothers on the Move (appropriately named MOM) have struggled to improve troubled schools in Community School District 8, which includes several lower-income neighborhoods in the Bronx.

MOM has used a community organizing approach to understand the concerns of local residents and to swell its ranks to more than 700 parents, many whose first language is Spanish. This includes time "on the doors," listening to people face-to-face in

the community's tenements and apartment buildings. This "data" is used to form MOM's action agenda, which focuses on school improvement. The group has taken on quality of life issues including housing and safety, as well.

Regular meetings are held in MOM's mural-covered storefront office on Intervale Avenue. Community members and MOM organizers work together to develop focused strategies to work with an individual school on a new reading program or move drug activity away from school grounds. Or they address broader systemic issues such as textbook distribution or funding equity. These meetings also include regular doses of leadership training to help these parents, who generally have little or no policy-making experience, build the facilitation, public speaking and advocacy skills they need to make a difference.

For many years, MOM confronted an intransigent school superintendent, who ignored many of MOM's concerns. Over time, MOM has been able to elect two of its members to the community school board and to pressure the superintendent to leave. The new superintendent, says **MOM ex-**

**ecutive director Milli Bonilla**, has begun to work cooperatively with parents and has viewed MOM less as an adversary than as a force for constructive change.

"Persistence has been one of the most important factors in our success," says Bonilla. "The system is set up to put you down and not give up because that's what they expect. That's their tactic. You have to stay at it."

(Contact: Milli Bonilla, Mothers on the Move (718) 842-2224)

## The Chicago "Experiment" Hard-won lessons from a broad experiment in site-based management

In 1988, the Chicago School Reform Act launched what was then the nation's largest local experiment in site-based decision-making. More than 300,000 voters elected 5,420 people into Local School Councils (LSCs) to begin school-based management (SBM) at 542 Chicago Public Schools. Ten years later, the LSCs are still up and running, and despite early negative reviews, are serving as a force for school improvement.

Initial criticism of LSCs generally pointed to the lack of policy coordination among the various actors in charge of district-wide



Parents as decision-makers.

reform. A 1993 evaluation by the North-Central Regional Education Laboratory, for example, found that the central administration's lack of an integrated, long-term set of goals perpetuated many of the same shortcomings the reform sought to overhaul, albeit at a decentralized level. These problems included a lack of accountability, unclear lines of authority and miscommunication between teachers and parents. This study, which examined the start-up years of the Chicago program, also argued that LSCs' efforts needed to be geared more explicitly toward improving student learning and student achievement.

A more recent report sponsored by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, however, shows that LSCs are, by and large, viable tools for school reform. Between 50% and 60% of LSCs, the study says, are proactive agents for improvement in their school communities, and 25%-30% are performing well, but need support. The school

district has taken steps to increase accountability in school governance. And many of the local councils have initiated comprehensive means to monitor and assess the performance of teachers and principals and tie their work to student achievement.

In addition, LSCs have helped change the fabric of community leadership and contributed to the development of civil society. Not only do local councils' membership approximate the racial and ethnic composition of the city, they have also afforded many parents and community members the opportunity to become elected officials and gain the leadership skills associated with these positions.

"LSCs are really the biggest adult education program in the country," says **Diana Lauber of the Cross Cities Campaign for Urban School Reform** based in Chicago. "The practice of leadership has made people more responsible and knowledgeable about the school system." Still, she cautions, central office must continue to reduce the constraints on schools to ensure that effective site-based management continues to be a real tool for change at all of Chicago's schools.

(Contact: Sarah Thompson, Chicago Public Schools Communications Office (773) 535-1626)