

# Parent Power: A Plus for Education

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Carol Kimmel

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*"When school leaders learn how to harness the concerns and talents of parents in constructive ways, they will have a source of power far exceeding nuclear energy."*

The existing confusion about the role parents play in the development of school curriculum can be likened to the old story of an inebriated driver who was stopped by a police officer for going the wrong way down a one-way street. When the officer asked him, "Didn't you see the arrows?" he replied, "Honest, officer, I didn't even see the Indians!"

Lack of communication, bewilderment, or whatever, the case of the mythical tippler illustrates one point: Each of the two parties involved was unclear about what the other wanted.

This perhaps is the situation when the debate over who determines school curriculum arises between parents and professional educators. What is needed in a discussion of this sort is clarity. Therefore, I'll begin by stating that from my position as President of the multi-million-member National PTA, I do not see parents wanting or attempting to usurp the professional obligations of teachers or administrators in the development of curriculum.

Parents value professional educators, but often find themselves in agreement with the statement that: "Education is too important to our children to be left solely to the professionals." They look instead for a sharing of this important task, with the best minds of parents and professionals being brought to bear on problems of education that, at the very least, are of prime importance to both groups.

Standing at swords' points over the pro-

tection of professional turf accomplishes little. In contrast, significant benefits can be realized for the children involved when educators begin to think about constructive patterns for involving parents in the fundamental decisions they may have been making unilaterally in the past.

For example, before superimposing the industrial model of professional negotiations on the field of education, it may be necessary to make some alterations. In industrial negotiations, only management and labor are involved; if negotiations break down and a strike occurs, the consumer can obtain a comparable product from another company. This option is closed to those who believe in the public school system, and who look with concern at the increasing number of strikes between management and teachers—ultimately affecting children and parents, who have had no "say" in negotiations.

In many school systems, efforts are being made to alter the traditional pattern of negotiations by including "the public." Although school boards traditionally represent "the public," increasing numbers of boards are not participating in what has come to be very sophisticated bargaining. Instead, they are delegating authority for this function to the administrative system and to trained personnel. Thus, parents are one step further removed from the action.

There are, however, new approaches being implemented to remedy this situation, among

them, variations on open negotiations and public bargaining. In California, for example, both sides must publish their negotiating proposals before private bargaining begins. Some school systems use these published papers as the basis for community discussions; others include parents or students as third-party participants in the actual bargaining. In still another approach, some school boards and teacher bargaining units have established a procedure that allows the community to help formulate demands during the first stages of negotiations.

Where parents have been excluded from the preliminary stages of bargaining, they have reacted by seeking injunctions against striking teachers, filing suits, launching mass boycotts, or taking over teaching and transportation functions—each action undertaken with the purpose of keeping the schools open and forcing consideration of divergent points of view.

There is real concern among parents that clearer definitions of what is subject to bargaining between “the establishment” and teachers are needed. Matters that involve curriculum, including the choice of texts and teaching materials, cannot be decided without a carefully considered plan of participation by parents. Systems that ignore parents’ concerns in these areas do so at their peril.

### When Budget and Bond Issue Problems Arise

Aside from the troubling questions involved in a realignment of bargaining power, significant but more subtle shifts in educational curriculum are taking place at local school levels because of parental involvement. For example, in one large system in Virginia, executive committees of local PTA units help set the yearly educational goals and determine the priorities and objectives of each school, which are then reflected in the budget request each school sends to the superintendent. This arrangement, set within the larger framework of the school system, permits *local communities and principals* to define *together* what each school community sees as the most important focus for the coming year. The superintendent and the school board, to the extent possible, incorporate local desires in budget allocations.

There is no question but that the use of trained volunteers has had an enormous effect



*Parent volunteers have an enormous effect on the ability of schools to extend the scope of curriculum, notes author Carol Kimmel. Here, Gloria Ryan—a housewife, mother of eight, and part-time college student—helps elementary school children in Prince George’s County, Maryland, make a quilt. Photo: Margaret Thomas, The Washington Post.*

on the ability of the schools to extend the scope of curriculum, and the impact of the professional teacher. Each year, hundreds of thousands of hours are contributed to local schools by PTA volunteers, whose efforts go far beyond the “help with paperwork” that used to be their function. Now they work with small groups under a teacher’s supervision, serve as tutors on a one-to-one basis, and bring to classrooms skills and talents that multiply and extend the teacher’s ability to handle the growing wealth of information to be imparted to children. Wise school systems know that parents who are involved in the “nitty gritty” of school work are the most effective supporters of the system when budget and bond issue problems arise.

When school leaders learn how to harness the concerns and talents of parents in constructive ways, they will have a source of power far exceeding nuclear energy. But like nuclear energy, that potential is, for the most part, unused and, if placed in unfriendly hands, dangerous to the goals we mutually share. I urge that we not wait for an explosion, but plan for the *peaceful and constructive use* of parent power. [E]

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