

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.

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