How to Organize Successful Parent Advisory Committees

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

Significant 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, resourcefulness, 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...
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.

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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.

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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 efforts 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).

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October 1989

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