



PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND LEARNING

OPSOA Speaks – September 1994

This is an executive summary of a paper researched and written by Dr. Peter N. Ross. This paper was initiated by four Directors of Education who are OPSOA members. A complete copy of the paper is available from the OPSOA offices.

The research is virtually unanimous: parent involvement makes a fundamental difference to student success. Coleman asserts that parents are withdrawing from the prominent role they once played in schools and schooling, to the detriment of children. As they contribute less to socialization, they deprive their children of the possibility of benefiting fully from schools.

When parents do become involved, they undertake a variety of tasks, including basic parental obligations, reinforcement of school work at home, assistance at schools, and participation on advisory councils. The forms of involvement that yield the greatest gains for children are those that include instructional activities. Involvement in governance may provide benefits for parents, but, Fullan notes, there is little evidence to show a relationship between parents participating in school governance and improved student achievement. One study in New Haven that provided parents with a multiplicity of activities, including governance, did find that there were significant gains in achievement.

There are many reasons for involving parents in schools: better long-term academic achievement, higher grades, greater motivation, fewer retention's in grades, fewer behaviour problems, and fewer school dropouts. The most fundamental reason for inviting parental involvement is that parents are responsible for the welfare of their children. Cooperation between families and schools ensures that both become more effective.

The most obvious connection between parent involvement and schooling is academic achievement. When parents are involved, students achieve better. Epstein, who has conducted extensive research on this issues, states: "The evidence is clear that parental encouragement, activities, and interest at home and parental participation in schools and classrooms positively influence achievement, even after the student's ability and family socioeconomic status are taken into account." Student achievement is affected by the conditions for learning established by parents, their interest in schoolwork, particular behaviours demonstrated by parents, the closeness of values between schools and families, and the use of homework to increase time-on-task.

In order to support improved learning, boards need to encourage greater parent involvement. What is significant is the design of a systematic approach that is grounded in a set of carefully considered purposes. Out of the statement of purpose will emerge goals to support involvement. Clearly, a new model of home-school relationships that represents a significant shift in thinking about the role of parents in the school is required. The obstacles to success in forming this model are many, including values about parental roles, attitudes about changing the role, lack of skill in enabling parents to participate, lack of imagination about what is possible, and a lack of political will to pursue change.

Leadership from central office is essential, especially in the area of policy-making. Both the process of writing the policy and its substance are important. The real arena for change, however, is the local school. The principal has to support the enlargement of parent involvement through setting the tone, training, and using the belief that all families have a right to be involved in decisions affecting their children, a willingness to develop outreach activities, a willingness to provide education for parents, and a commitment to including the under-involved and under-served. Both teachers and parents require training: the former to acquire skills and strategies that enhance cooperation and the latter to acquire information, confidence, and instructional skill.

LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCILS

The following is excerpted from "Local School Councils... Where We Stand", a position of the American Association of School Administrators. Copies are available from AASA.

Getting People Involved

Greater community involvement... empowerment... responsiveness. These words and the ideas they represent are having a profound effect on all public institutions, including schools.

Through personal contact, surveys, advisory councils, parent groups, shared decision making, school-based management, and many other means, schools have diligently worked to keep their key publics engaged.

Now another type of involvement has entered the education arena --- local school councils, which sometimes have other names, such as school site councils, management councils, and accountability committees. Whatever they're called, these councils, sometimes appointed and sometimes elected, serve at the local school level. Their functions vary from providing advice to making far-reaching and delicate educational decisions affecting students and staff.

Whether local school councils are appropriate largely depends on the way they are structured. If they are organized to provide advice on policy and to counsel those charged with ultimate responsibility for the governance and administration of local schools, then their contributions can be valuable. If, on the other hand, they are organized in a way that leads to time-consuming conflict, power struggles, and continual ambiguity about who is responsible for what, they will become a distraction. When that happens, the councils can lead to frustration, a lack of focus and accountability, and ultimately, the loss of talented professional educators.

What Should Councils Avoid?

Many educators agree on what local school councils should avoid. For example, they should not:

- Make decisions that isolate school board policy;
- Try to take on the role of principal, superintendent, or school board, each of whom must maintain unique and specific legal responsibility for the school system; nor
- Venture beyond the limits of their expertise or their assignments.

Five Steps in Effective Local School Council Operation

To serve local school needs most effectively, a council must be systematic in its approach to assignments. Here are five basic steps for getting organized:

1. Planning – The council, working in collaboration with the school principal and staff, should determine the issues it will address or the problems or needs it will tackle on behalf of the school. Plans and activities should be consistent with the overall mission of the school district.
2. Assessment – Working with the school principal and staff, the council should gather information that will contribute to the appropriate handling of its assignment. Informed judgement is essential. Depending on the issue at hand, useful information might include: a demographic profile of the school, dropout rates, test scores, results of school climate surveys, attitudes of parents and other citizens, and how the community gets its information about the school. Members of councils might be especially interested in learning whether and how their work is contributing to a better education for students in the classroom.
3. Goal Setting – Working with the principal, the council should establish clear goals and objectives about what it hopes to achieve by taking on certain projects or addressing specific issues.
4. Strategy Development – Once the objectives are in place, the council, still working in tandem with school staff, should develop an action plan. What specifically will the council do to reach its objectives on behalf of the school?

5. Evaluation – As it moves forward with a project, the council should informally discuss how well things are going. Regular evaluations should be sought from the school principal. When a project is completed, the council should determine how well it did in reaching its stated objectives. Was the effort a great success? Did the effort contribute to better education for students? Did the council take on more than it could handle? What should the council do differently next time? Of course, the results of formal and informal evaluations should be considered in developing future plans, objectives, and strategies.

Local School Councils... To Be or Not To Be

Whether local school councils improve education and how they do this are legitimate topics for discussion and debate. The structure of local school councils and how they fit into the governance system are key factors in determining if they will enhance education or cause a serious distraction from the primary task of our schools --- ensuring student learning.

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