



Part III:

Families and Schools



Parent Leadership

Topic

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Shared or distributed leadership is a common element in school improvement research and practice (Walberg, 2007). Often that means distributing decision-making responsibilities beyond the people whose job titles identify them as “administrators.” Lead teachers may assume quasi-administrative roles. Leadership and instructional teams make decisions and develop plans, extending leadership to groups with specific purposes. Sharing leadership with parents breaks new ground in many schools, but where it is prevalent, research demonstrates its power in boosting school improvement (Moore, 1998; Redding & Sheley, 2005). More than that, when a school invests in developing the leadership capabilities of parents, it accesses an untapped resource and lifts the life prospects of the parent leaders themselves (Corbett & Wilson, 2008; Henderson, 2010; Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004).

Parents may be nurtured as leaders for a variety of purposes:

Deciding

1. Providing input to critical school decisions about curriculum, instruction, schedules, resource allocation, student services, school leadership, and cocurricular programs.
2. Making decisions, setting guidelines, developing plans, and implementing activities related to areas where the responsibility of the school and the home overlap.

Organizing

3. Planning and administering open houses, family-school nights, transition nights, college and career fairs, and other school events.
4. Building a strong, broad-based parent organization that can serve to create an inclusive school community, formulate positions, build consensus, develop proposals, and select leaders to serve on decision-making groups such as a school council or school improvement team.

Engaging

5. Providing outreach to engage other parents in support of their children's learning and in assisting with the school's functions.
6. Convening groups of parents in homes to meet with teachers in "home gatherings."
7. Organizing and conducting home visits, community walks, and other opportunities to build collaborative relationships between families and school staff.

Educating

8. Serving as leaders to facilitate workshops and courses for parents.
9. Participating in professional development for teachers related to teachers' work with families.
10. Planning and providing training for school personnel to make the school a more welcoming place.
11. Planning and providing training for volunteers who work in the school.

Advocating and Connecting

12. Advocating on behalf of the school and families with community and political leaders and groups.
13. Connecting school staff, students, and families to community resources for the benefit of the school and its families.

The personal benefits derived by parents in leadership roles also flow to their children and to the school itself. Parents and families acquire skills, confidence, and a sense of self-efficacy. Researchers Lee Shumow and Richard Lomax, in *Parental Efficacy: Predictor of Parenting Behavior and Adolescent Outcomes*, show the connection between parents' sense of efficacy and their children's higher achievement in school (2001).

Parent leaders also can:

- gain management and executive skills that they can transfer to their jobs or home-based issues;
- increase helpful contacts and build social networks that they can use to create opportunities for their children and themselves;
- develop closer ties to their communities and neighbors; and
- learn how to influence decisions made in their schools and communities (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009).

Parent Leadership in Decision Making

Since 1988, Chicago schools have been governed by Local School Councils, the majority of members being parents elected by other parents. The councils serve many functions typically assigned to boards of education, such as selecting and evaluating the principal, developing school improvement plans, and developing and approving the school budget. A study of the Chicago experience found that elementary schools with more effective school councils were significantly more likely to have improved student achievement in reading, moving from 20% to 37% of students reading at the national average, compared to no significant increase for schools with ineffective councils (Moore, 1998).

The Academic Development Institute utilized School Community Councils with a majority of parent members to plan and administer a comprehensive family engagement initiative focused on student learning in reading and mathematics. The project included 123 low-achieving schools. A study of the schools' gains on state assessments showed that project schools outgained a control group of schools with similar beginning assessment scores and demographics by a significant margin over the two-year period (Redding & Sheley, 2005).

Preparing and Supporting Parent Leaders

As all leaders do, parent leaders require training and support (Henderson, 2010; Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004; Redding, 2006). Well-designed parent leadership programs prepare parents for their leadership roles with training on:

- Human relations strategies;
- Effective team functioning;
- Communication skills;
- Research and practice on the family's influence on student learning;
- Use of a variety of data;
- Goal-setting, planning, and program evaluation;
- Developing organizational constitutions, bylaws, and procedures;

- Defining roles for parents and parent leaders; and
- Understanding and working with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

Coaching, mentoring, and follow-up support to training are key elements of a well-designed parent leadership program. Organizations that promote and train parent leaders offer on-site technical assistance and consultation. District and school personnel who serve as family facilitators, trained for the purpose, may also provide consistent training and support for parent leaders.

School Leaders as Proponents of Parent Leaders

The impetus for parent leadership must begin somewhere, and the most likely somewhere is with superintendents and principals. District and school leaders establish the importance of parent leadership, organize training for parent leaders, and set goals and expectations for decision-making bodies and other groups in which parents are members and actively participate with these groups. The district and school leaders convey the importance of parent leadership to the school board, faculty, and parents.

Parents as Advocates for Parent Leadership

Parents also take the initiative in insisting that parent leadership is given its due in their districts and schools. They advocate for parent participation in decision making and for training and support for parent leaders. Parents also seek offices of influence on school boards and school councils to ensure that family engagement is embedded in the operations of their schools.

Action Principles

State Education Agency

1. Enforce the law by monitoring how districts carry out the Title I parent

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involvement requirements and the state's own requirements. Make it clear that Title I funds allocated for parent involvement can be used for leadership training.

2. Designate state personnel with specific duties that include the advancement of parent leadership and family engagement. Identify parent leadership training programs that can serve as models or be directly adopted.
3. Put parents on school councils by state statute or guidance and outline the responsibilities of the councils.
4. Get advice from the grass roots with a parent–community advisory council and encourage districts to create district councils. Go beyond “the usual suspects” to appoint authentic parent leaders.
5. Invite local parent and community leaders to meet with state leadership and meet with and speak at their events.
6. Hold a state conference every year or two to advance family and community engagement.
7. Offer parent leadership training across the state as a model for what districts and schools can emulate.

Local Education Agency

1. Commit the resources of time, staff, and funds to train and support parent leaders at the district and school levels.
2. Collaborate with community organizing groups to recruit parent leaders from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.
3. Include a line item in each school's budget for family engagement with a portion allocated for training and support of parent leaders.
4. Include parents in the district improvement process.
5. Require schools to include parents on appropriate school teams and ensure that the teams represent the diversity of the community, and operate with bylaws, agendas, and minutes.
6. Require principals to report monthly on parent leadership and family engagement activities in their schools, including the

work of school teams that include parents. Keep the focus on improving student achievement.

7. Include in each monthly report to the board of education what the district and each school are doing relative to parent leadership and family engagement.

School

1. Include in the school's decision-making structure a School Community Council with parents as the majority of membership, operating with bylaws, agendas, and minutes.
2. Include parents on other appropriate school teams and groups and/or seek their input in decisions made by school teams and in plans for school improvement.
3. Provide training and support for parent leaders.
4. Include in the school budget a line item for family engagement with a portion allocated for the training and support of parent leaders.
5. Provide professional development for teachers on family engagement and work with parent leaders.

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Resources

- Center for Parent Leadership, www.centerforparentleadership.org: The Prichard Committee's consulting and technical assistance unit including programs for parent leadership.
- Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, www.cipl.org: Information about the work of the organization and brief reports.
- Connecticut Commission on Children, www.ct.gov/coc/parents_see.htm: Information about the leadership training program, Parents Seeking Excellence in Education (Parents SEE)
- Institute for Educational Leadership, www.iel.org: Program areas include parent and community leadership.
- Families and Schools, www.families-schools.org: Resources for parents and schools and new issues and archive for *School Community Journal*.
- Parent Institute for Quality Education, www.piqe.org: Information about this leadership training program that focuses on parents as leaders at home.