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ABSTRACT

While the concept of decentralization does highlight parent participation in school affairs, the actual process of getting parents involved in educational decision making is one of progressively building up confidence, knowledge, and skills of strategies which the system has withheld from them in the past. A small group of risk-taking parents can gradually participate more by making projects visible and involving. As the group becomes a place of support and excitement for the parent, isolation and fear of confrontation begins to be overcome. In addition, through reaching out to similar groups in progressive stages, the group increases its sense of determination, strength, and knowledge. As it gains a high level of sophistication it must, in turn, contribute to newer groups in an effort to constantly increase the coalition power of parents throughout the city. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (KG)

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SOME BASIC GUIDELINES FOR BUILDING PARENT PARTICIPATION
GROUPS TO EFFECT CHANGES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

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INTRODUCTION

The effort to effectively involve ghetto parents in the daily life of the public schools has recently been seen to be a top priority. (1) It has been recognized that one of the basic elements missing in the education of minority group children is the real involvement of their parents in the decision-making process of the school bureaucracy. Any real changes in the public school system will come from the increased voice of these parents. The move to decentralize the New York City schools, putting power in the hands of the parents of the community, depends for its ultimate success on the skills developed by these parents.

Parents who have been excluded from the life of their schools will not suddenly be able to participate because an administrative change has been made. After so many years of abuse and neglect, ghetto parents have given up the hope of breaking through to a system that has traditionally labeled and abused them. Many of the parents who are today thought of as "apathetic" and "uninvolved" by the school authorities were, in the past, punished for the attempts they made to become involved in the school life of their children. The

school system has found many ways to stop parents in the past.

The major techniques they have used have been:

1. Co-optation or "buying off the troublemakers" Parents who seemed to be getting too militant in making demands on the school system have been given jobs within the system, often within the same school their child attends. Once they have a job at stake they rapidly quiet down and "see the schools point of view." Others have been rewarded by getting special favors for their children (transfer across district lines, placement in special classes, extra care taken with homework assignments, etc.) These parents, fearing the loss of these privileges, ceased in their efforts to mobilize their neighbors.

2. Cooling-out. The most usual device employed to quiet down parents who make demands is to set up a study committee or powerless advisory board. Local school boards and their meetings often serve this purpose. People come with complaints, but the complaints can go nowhere because the boards have no power to act. Executive committees of P.A.s meet with principals and receive careful explanations of school law and education theory but nothing happens. The school authorities tell their problems to the parents and the parents go home feeling sorry for them. The invading of endless administrative laws and the placing of constant

barriers is a variation of cooling-out which might be called "ring-around-the-rosy."

3. Outright Punishment. In the same manner as school aide jobs are given to "buy-off" troublemakers, they are also withheld from those parents who seem to be making too many demands. In more severe cases, the children of parents who complain are burdened with extra homework, transferred from teacher to teacher, etc. Their behavior is viewed as "emotional and destructive" and they become a guidance problem.

Of the three methods of silencing parents and turning them into "apathetic bystanders," parents, of course, most fear the third alternative. In addition to these three methods, poor parents have been often and systematically told that "the professionals know best" or "what could you possibly have to suggest to someone who has a degree from a college?" The failure of their children in the school system is viewed as their failure, and rarely is it interpreted to them as a failure on the part of the school system. Rarely, if ever, are poor parents told that their taxes support the school and that the school employees are public servants. Foreign-born parents, in particular, view free public education as a privilege often denied to them in their own countries. They look up to the school and fear their

children will lose the privilege if they place demands or ask questions.

The process of building real parent participation must break down all the barriers that have been created. To effectively work with parents you must first whole-heartedly believe that they really want to participate if they are given the help to know how to do it and the strength to face and break down the obstacles that have been put in their paths. Once accepting this basic belief, you must also recognize that this cannot happen overnight. Helping parents to view themselves and the schools in a new way is a very long process. The person who wishes to organize them for this change must know that he must invest himself in it fully and that he cannot afford to lose patience or hope. The worker must have all the hope and confidence the parents now lack. He must also have sufficient anger at the system that has treated them so poorly, and complete determination that change will come (although slowly.) There are no quick magic formulas to organizing poor parents, but there are some basic principles, which if kept in mind, can help in the process.

I. BEGIN WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The people to organize first are those who are the angriest and seem to be the most willing to risk the wrath

of the school. If no natural group already exists, then the worker must set out to identify these people and pull them together. The best place to look for them is most often outside the regular established groups and away from the regular established LEADERS. For the most part, the Parents Associations of ghetto schools are the least likely sources of change. The parents you are looking for are those who have never felt welcome in the P.A. or those who have been "turned off" by the meaningless activities of cake sales, teacher recognition days etc. On the whole, the parents with the most dramatic school problems are not found in the school organizations.

They can be found in the school yards talking to other parents, alone in their apartments, or talking to their neighbors. Occasionally, they can be found in the community groups that have sprung up to fill the many needs of the poor. If you have access to the parents whose children are receiving remedial help in a special neighborhood program, these may be good parents to begin with. You can at least be sure that these parents have children with the most severe school problems and have the most cause for discontent.

The worker's skill is to keep watching and to be receptive, rather than to grab onto the leaders identified

by the school. There are no "all-purpose" leaders so don't look for them. Almost everyone who affiliates with a group committed to change and sticks with it, can contribute some type of leadership. . .all groups need their "extremists" and their "moderates" (as long as they are not so far apart in views as to split the group or keep it from taking any action.) The quiet warm person who can encourage others as needed as the verbal "arm swinging" speech maker. Essentially, people will emerge out of the organizing itself and the leaders at the beginning may not be the leaders later on. One bond must exist among all the group members; they must be dissatisfied and want change. They need not start by having the knowledge or courage to change that can come later through the organizing effort.

II. DON'T GET "HUNG-UP" ON NUMBERS

Most groups flounder while they wait for the numbers to increase and the leaders drown in frustration. The basic rule in regard to numbers is start small, but start working! Four or five determined parents upset about a situation and willing to see it through can successfully launch a campaign of genuine change within the school. These same five people (even if only one does the talking at first) can carry the campaign to the district superintendent and as far as the superintendent of schools. Any issue that this small group wins can be used as a selling point to bring in more parents

to the original core group. Word spreads quickly in the community and the core group should help to spread it.

All the parents should know when a victory is won and that it was won by parents. The small group that does the engineering should involve other parents along the way by getting them to send letters, sign petitions, make public their complaints or just listen to the story of the interview with the principals, etc. These are all forms of participation and they should be congratulated and thanked for the most minimal help they gave. It may be all they can give at this time. Even if the other parents did nothing to help the small group of activists, they should be constantly informed of what is going on and what the next step will be so that one more person may be ready to join along the way.

A group gets built solidly with one new person at a time.

The reality of any organization is that each person absorbs himself in its work to a varying degree. In every group a small few bear the burden of the bulk of the work; but, if they want to eventually share more of the work they must keep encouraging the non-participants. To build the core group, it is vital that the minimal-participators be thanked, encouraged, courted and never punished for being inactive. For parents to publicly scold other parents for their lack of participation is to play into the hands of the school

establishment which loves to point to parent apathy as the cause of low pupil achievement. You cannot afford to act like the system and blame the parent for not participating; if they aren't coming out, you haven't found ways to reach them (or you are setting your numbers goal unrealistically high.) After every meeting check yourself to see what you may have missed doing, or could do better:

1. Were invitations sent enough in advance, were they clear, were they in the parents' language? Did people get personal invitations, follow-ups, phone calls or visits?

2. What about the time and the place?

3. Was there babysitting and was it adequate? What other solutions are there to help parents solve the problems of what to do with the children during meetings?

4. Was the topic clear?

Did people get a chance to talk, ask questions, go over anything they missed, etc.

III. BREAK DOWN BIG PROBLEMS INTO SMALLER ISSUES.

The beginning issues to organize around as well as the number of people needed to begin should be small. However, the issues must also be very relevant and have a good chance of immediate success. They must relate very directly to improving the way the school teaches the children and the parents'

role in decision making. Don't get sidetracked into issues like lunchroom procedures, discipline in the hallways, sewing classes, one-day-a-year ethnic celebrations and cookie sales. Parents are not there to do the work of the school but to make sure the school does its work effectively. This point is essential.

The issues chosen to begin with should be those that not only help the children directly, but also help the parents learn the channels of change and forms of action. Most groups need help in breaking down large problems (Example, "our children are behind in reading") into small parts that can be immediately worked on. All the small parts add to reading achievement, but they are pieces that can be worked on one at a time. There is no one solution to teaching children to read and improving the atmosphere in the schools, but bringing parents into the process will help a lot.

BEGINNING ISSUES

Example 1: Do parents know the reading scores of their children? Probably not. If they are not placed on the report card as a matter of course (they are supposed to be but rarely are) set about to make sure that this is done. The regulation is clear, it is easy to check and make sure it is adhered to. The Board must respond to pressure to

comply. Principals, district superintendents, as well as individual teachers can be held clearly accountable. Get the reading scores of your schools--make them widely available.

Example 2: Report cards. Are they translated if there is a large Spanish or Chinese speaking population? Probably not. Schools can be pressured into doing this. They cannot come up with any reason why it should not be done. They are supplied with auxilliary personnel. Are report cards given before teacher conferences?

Example 3: Auxilliary Personnel. Do parents know they exist? Is there a sign in the language of the neighborhood in the front hall welcoming parents and telling them where the auxilliary teacher who speaks their language can be found? A principal can be pressured into doing this. There is no reason he can give for not doing it. Are auxilliary personnel always available to translate or are they covering preparation periods? Do they reach out to new-comers? How?

Example 4: Homework. Is homework being given regularly? Is homework checked by the teacher? On the whole, in lower level classes the answer to both is no. Parents want to help but cannot. The regulation says it must be given and be corrected. Principals and teachers must comply with this regulation no matter what their excuse of lack of time. They must find their own solution. If the teacher and principal do not comply, the district office must be held accountable. From here parents can go on to the quality of homework; they can tell if it is punishment-busy-work or really useful. They can establish standards and get them adhered to. Do parents know the kind of specific questions to ask at teacher conferences? Supply them with questions, role play interviews.

Example 5: Textbooks. Do all children get to take books home? Do books reflect the lives and ethnic backgrounds of the children? Is denial of the right to take a textbook home used as punishment? Lack of money cannot be accepted as an excuse as books are available for all children.

Example 6: Monitors. How many children roam the halls of the school? How many children spend most of the day sitting in the main office waiting for messages? Enforce the rule that no child can be used as a monitor without the parents permission. Parents can send letters to school insisting their child not be used in this way. State law supports the right of a child to be receiving instruction while the city receives funds to teach him. Teachers who do this can be exposed and principals forced to curtail this. Visit the schools in groups, note irregularities, take evidence to principals. Re-visit to check on changes.

Obviously, each of these areas leads to another more complicated one, but each begins to present a small area of reality that parents can organize around changing. All of these things and countless more that groups can focus first efforts on can be done by four or five determined people willing to see it through and spread the word to others. The best first issues are those that are the easiest to win, the most visible, and those that touch the parents directly.

IV. DEMONSTRATE WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO FOR EACH OTHER.

The quickest way to show the hesitant parent the value of banding together comes through demonstrating that if she goes with a neighbor who will speak out for her loudly and clearly, she will get better results than if she goes alone. No parent should ever go to a school conference alone. She has the right to take a neighbor or friend to help her understand to be a witness to any commitments made. Parents also need to share their knowledge of resources that will support them such as legal services that may be provided by another neighborhood agency.

Parents should be encouraged to band together to increase their own knowledge of the learning process so they can check on the way it is being administered. Classes in which one parent can show others basic reading methods, the new math, or any other educational skills they share, bring people closer to the core group, as they provide a base for action as well as a source of basic knowledge for which the ghetto parent is enormously hungry.

V. BUILD GROUP LIFE.

The inner group, as it begins to absorb greater amounts of a parent's time, must be a pleasant, exciting, stimulating and warm place to be. Organizing can be a frustrating and frightening experience on many occasions and the core group

member needs all the support he or she can get from the other members of the group. Activists often become progressively alienated from many of their neighbors who fear the consequences of change and the necessary turmoil that the exposure of the schools' inadequacies will bring. As the group becomes more demanding and begins to use more dramatic techniques to get to its goal, it will find people criticizing and fearing it. Respite from this, tension must come from the group itself.

Additionally, parents who become absorbed in organizing, find it takes them out of the home for progressively greater amounts of time. Their children, who often must come along to meetings for lack of baby sitters, need to find the experiences their parent is going through, one that is exciting to them rather than depriving. So, for both the parents and their children, the group and its headquarters should be a place of social exchange and pleasure. Parents need to have comic relief as well as a chance to trade recipes and stories in between discussions of education and strategy. For the children, headquarters should be a place kids like to come with a minimum of 'don'ts', things to play with, as well as chores they can help with. Most little children enjoy stapling, stuffing envelopes and coloring in flyers. Besides being fun, these kinds of activities help

the children get closer to the things their parents are doing and the things the group believes in. For both the husbands and the children of activist mothers, the group should add some immediate gratification to their lives in exchange for the energy and the time it takes from family life. Post mortems at peoples' homes after meetings or particularly hectic confrontations, bring the non-active spouse in to share the frustrations and excitement of the organizing activities of the core group members.

VI. USE AND BE USED BY SIMILAR GROUPS

As the group grows in the scope of its organizing efforts, the sophistication of its methods and the progressively greater amounts of conflict in its confrontations, it will need to make contact with people outside its own school or community. Reaching out to other similar groups or individuals of like background who are going through the same experiences in other places helps the group break through the growing sense of isolation it may be facing. Every group needs to feel like a part of a whole and every group needs to test its own progress and skill against others of similar background.

During the beginning phase try to find someone or some group who has successfully engineered a campaign in a local

school or district similar to your own. Visit them or ask them to speak with you to give you the benefits of what they have learned in the way of strategy as well as to offer an image of other neighborhood people who have gone through conflict and survived and prospered. People often lose faith in their own ability to grow and change and only others like themselves can really spur them on. The parent who is ashamed to speak in public because of her accent or poor speech is amazed to find someone else speaking with great confidence whose grammar and accent may be far more pronounced than hers. Eventually, city-wide groups and conferences can be used to increase knowledge of strategies as well as confidence. But at the beginning, stick to small group meetings with plenty of opportunity for questions from the guest and trading of anecdotes about the schools. As the skill and experience of your own group increases, it can solidify its gains by offering the same service for other beginning groups.

In addition to giving direct knowledge and support, the connections with outside groups will also increase the power base of your own. Your ability to call on other groups for a demonstration or a visit to the State Commissioner in Albany will obviously strengthen all the participants. If poor people are ever to genuinely achieve a place as equals

in the decision making process of the schools, they must begin to pool resources and build the power to negotiate on a city and state wide level. Many individual school problems can be affected through changes in laws and through changes in other structures such as the Board of Education, Board of Examiners, United Federation of Teachers, the Poverty Program, and so on. Establish a good pipeline to other groups so that you can tap into the resources they offer and be able to join with them when the need arises (see attached list of education groups.)

VII. KEEP GOING BACK TO YOUR ROOTS AND KEEP ROOM OPEN AT THE TOP

As the group is growing in numbers, scope of issues, and place in the city-wide parent participation movement, the group must keep reaching back into the community for support and new recruits. The danger of moving into a legislative and city-wide level and neglecting to give individual service to the parents in the neighborhood is a great one. From a practical point of view, this can lead to the death of a group. Leaders of activist groups cannot stay in leadership forever. The process of the group itself is an exhausting one and leaders burn out as they grow weary or their children leave school age. No leadership can go on indefinitely and

the group must constantly keep itself flexible and open enough to reach out to new people and keep the minimum participators sharing in the victories it achieves. This is often a difficult process since the sophistication of the original leaders has often grown so much that the other parents are several steps behind them and they are loathe to slow down the group until new people catch up. To keep the core group from having to "backtrack" too much and yet meet the needs of bringing in new potential leaders, the group must build "second range leadership groups;" that are, in essence, beginning the process of parent participation all over again. Core members must take time out from their other organizing activities to invest themselves in the training of their own sub-groups which perhaps are working on "beginning issues" within the local schools, finding new ones or strengthening old gains. A group that does not keep looking back into its community for new leadership will burn itself-out and leave behind the new future "apathetic parents" who were started along a process from which they were abruptly dropped. In addition to keeping the group going, the openness and flexibility of the core group will ensure against its becoming a new "bureaucracy." You cannot change the Board of Education with a group that acts like the Board of Education.

SUMMARY

The process of parent participation will not happen by "administrative fiat." While the first step of opening the doors has been made in the concept of decentralization, the actual process of getting parents involved is one of progressively building up confidence, knowledge and skills of strategies which the system has withheld from them in the past. Through small successes, at first led by a small group of risk-taking parents, a group can begin. With great attention to making projects visible and involving, on even the most minute level, all other parents, a group begins to recruit. As the group becomes a place of support and excitement for the parent as well as the whole family, the isolation and fear of confrontation begins to be overcome. In addition, through reaching out to similar groups in progressive stages, the group increases its sense of determination, strength and knowledge. As it gains high level of sophistication it must, in turn, contribute to newer groups in an effort to constantly increase the coalition power of parents throughout the city.

At the same time as a group gains in strength and sophistication, it must remember that the group has grown by a personal interest in each member and it must build-in structures to keep up the process of reaching into the local community for future leadership. Its ultimate success rests

on its ability to keep enlarging and replacing its decision making core group and in its obvious refusal to become another entrenched bureaucracy that will some day have to be overthrown by a new group of less advantaged parents. The point cannot be made strongly enough that building parent participation is an intensive task as the leaders of the movement must overcome the many years of "brainwashing" that poor people have received. This "brainwashing" has convinced them that they cannot make significant decisions. This can only be proved to people by living through the experience of successfully taking power and using it to enhance the education of their own children. It is a long long process and is fraught for all with doubt, confusion and frustration. The rewards are also enormous and the personal growth of individuals into powerful self-assured people is the ultimate result. Obviously the children of these self-assured people have been made progressively more ready as well as able to learn through the work of their own parents.

While we are focusing our efforts on improving the public school system, we must recognize, that, if changes come through genuine parent participation, members have, at the same time, learned the skills that they need to change all other establishments which are not providing the impartial quality services which every citizen has the right to expect.

APPENDIX

SOME OTHER PARENT PARTICIPATION GROUPS:

1. EQUAL, 37 Riverside Drive, TR 4 0049
This group has good resource materials such as Education Analysis of Laws, capital budgets, Board of Education circulars
2. HARLEM PARENTS COMMITTEE, 514 W. 126th St., MO 6 1440
They put out a monthly newsletter and hold meetings on specific education problems and programs.
3. UNITED BRONX PARENTS, 791 Prospect Avenue, Bronx
They have resources of excellent training materials and run training seminars.

Check with your local Poverty Corporation or Community Progress Center to see what Parent Involvement Programs are funded in your community.

NEWSLETTERS AND FORUMS:

1. AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS FORUM, 1046 Fulton St., Brooklyn
2. CENTER FOR URBAN EDUCATION, 33 W. 42nd St., N.Y. 10036
3. TWO BRIDGES NEWS, 99 Madison Street, N.Y. 10002
4. MUST, 235 E. 49 Street, N.Y. 10017

FOOTNOTE: (1) Buddy Report "Reconnection For Learning"

UFT Position Paper on Decentralization

Mayor's Report on Decentralization