DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 081 EA 027 192

AUTHOR Ehman, Lee H.
TITLE Rhetorics and Realities of Parent Involvement in Schools: A Case of a Restructuring Middle School.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 46p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Cooperation; Intermediate Grades; Interprofessional Relationship; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Grievances; *Parent Participation; *Parent Responsibility; Parent Role; *Parent School Relationship; Politics of Education; *School Restructuring

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined forms of parent involvement in a restructuring middle school. Data for the 18-month case study were obtained through observation, interviews, and document analysis. The paper focuses on the relationship of the Parent Council, a parent group attempting to influence school decision making, and the principal. Findings show that the rhetoric of parents as collaborators conflicted with the reality of educators' attempts to maintain boundaries between their professional domain and parents' involvement. The conflict was manifested in three ways: in differences over goals for parents' actions; in struggles for control; and in a lack of trust on both sides. An exception to the norm, a situation in which the principal invited parents to participate in a critical decision about the direction of restructuring in the school, is described. (LMI)

Rhetorics and Realities of Parent Involvement in Schools: A Case of a Restructuring Middle School

Lee H. Ehman
Indiana University

Abstract

This paper explores and interprets forms of parental involvement in a restructuring middle school, using an eighteen-month case study based on observations, interviews, and document analysis. Interpretations are made in light of alternative theoretical perspectives, as well as the local school's historical, social, and political context of restructuring over four years. It is argued that the rhetoric about parent collaboration and the reality of boundary maintenance by professional educators provides a context for three constant themes in the case study--differences over goals of parents' actions; struggles for control; and erosion of trust. The paper concludes with an important exception to this interpretation, showing the principal inviting parents' influence in a critical decision about direction of restructuring in the school.

Presentation to the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Divisions G & H. Session 6.57, "Bridging Worlds: Multiple Perspectives on School Change." April 18, 1995.

Alternative Conceptions of Parental Involvement

Parent involvement is a central ingredient of school restructuring frameworks. For example, the Coalition of Essential Schools (1993) sets forth in the seventh of their nine Common Principles: "...parents should be treated as essential collaborators". Middle schools undergoing restructuring are exhorted to involve parents through meaningful roles in building-level governance groups, communication, and support of children's learning processes at home (Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, 1989, p. 67).

Much research and other writing about parent involvement frames it within the latter two aspects--home-school communication and support of home learning. This conception of parent involvement hinges on the goal of increasing student learning. Epstein's 1993 typology of parent involvement, which has evolved over time to embrace the present six categories, includes:

- Type 1: Basic obligations of families including parenting skills and home conditions for learning at each age and grade level;
- Type 2: Basic obligations of schools including school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress;
- Type 3: Volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support the school and students;
- Type 4: Involvement of families in learning activities at home;
- Type 5: Participation by families in decision making, governance, and advocacy;
- Type 6: Collaborations with community groups and agencies

> to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. (Epstein 1993, pp. 710-711)

Only Type 5 has to do with direct parent participation in school decision making and this one was not included in her earlier work (1987); the remaining five reflect supportive roles for parents, ranging from providing basic family support of children in the home to collaborations with community groups to strengthen school programs. She contends that "...Not all types of involvement lead quickly or directly to achievement gains for students" (p. 711); but the latter clearly signals the goal of parent involvement as she, and many others working in this area, see it. Parents mainly are partners who support school professionals in fostering learning and achievement of their children.

In contrast, Davies (1987) contends that dissatisfaction with schools, calls for reform, and attempts at restructuring bring with them a different goal, and increased levels, of parental involvement. The categories Davies sets forth includes one that incorporates almost all of Epstein's: "coproduction...refers to those activities...in school or at home, that contribute to school efforts to instruct pupils more effectively and raise student achievement" (p. 148). His other three categories--decision making, citizen advocacy, and parent choice--emphasize active, and sometimes contentious, roles in which parents attempt to bring about change in schools both for their own children individually, and students more generally.

In his recent work Sarason (1995) argues that issues of

principle and power underlie the recent upsurge of concern over parent involvement. His "political principle" justifying parent involvement is that "...when decisions are made affecting you or your possessions, you should have a role, a voice in the process of decision making" (p. 19). Like Fine (1993) and Davies, Sarason views parent involvement as an issue of power, where parents have less power than professional educators; it will necessarily lead to conflict with expressions of "...resentment, anger, and militancy" (p. 21).

Thus, from the research and rhetoric on parent-school relationships over the past two decades, two distinct interpretations regarding parental involvement emerge: Epstein's collaborative, partnership building view; and an adversarial "parents' rights" view, in which questions about power, authority, and control necessarily dominate, argued by Davies, Fine, and Sarason.

Fine frames her arguments about parent involvement within and urban school reform picture, asserting that parents are an example of an "exclusion" from democratic discourse in the public sphere of schools. Parents aren't treated as equals and therefore lack power; school bureaucracies shun parents' diverse views and critique; parents find their private interests--in their own children--overshadowed by school staff's more abstract discussions of the common good (1993, pp. 683-684). She concludes that avoiding issues of power differences or assuming equality of parents and school staff has undermined "real

educational transformation" (p. 684).

Epstein's interpretation of parent involvement focusses on participation and "school and family partnerships" rather than Fine's emphasis on power and authority. Epstein argues that her typology of involvement represents "multiple powers and broader empowerments than does a focus on decision making alone" (1993, 710).

One feature that differentiates these two interpretations is the goal of parent involvement. Epstein reflects the mainstream view that parent involvement should lead to achievement gains for students. For Fine, Davies, and Sarason, the goal of parent involvement is democratic participation in public discourse about restructuring schools (1993, p. 684). The case study presented here depicts a parent group engaged in attempts to influence decision making in a restructuring middle school, and is therefore more consonant with the latter orientation.

Methods and Data Sources

This 18-month research employed a case study method, in which I spent the entire 1993-94 school year attending classes, meetings, and other school activities, including six monthly meetings of the PTO, 19 weekly meetings of the "Parent Council" group, and many other meetings involving parents. I spent three days each week in the school, for a total of 110 days. During the 1994-95 year I continued school visits on a twice a month schedule, but have been able to attend nearly all Parent Council

meetings, nine from September 1994 through January 1995.

For the first half year, I depended mainly on observation and informal conversation with parents, students, teachers, and administrators; during the second half, I added audiotaped interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and students; and throughout the period I amassed hundreds of relevant documents. While data was collected from all venues involving parents, I focus this report on the "Parent Council" group because it was so central to the school's parent involvement, addressing most of the curriculum and instruction and other core issues of the school's program. Luckily, the group spent much of the year and a half developing and debating a "vision statement" for the school, and this continuous discussion, together with the successive drafts it generated, precipitated many viewpoints for easy capture. I analyzed all the material for persisting themes, issues, and critical incidents, going back and forth between the emerging categories and concepts in my data, and the literature containing theory and research on parent involvement. Insights and perspectives from one side informed interpretations of the other.

What is this a case of? Wolcott (1998, p. 203) points out that this question always has to be addressed somehow in case study research. In this paper I have singled out Yorkton Middle School's Parent Council[1] as the core of the "case" of parent

[1] "Yorkton" and other place, organization, and personal names used in the paper are pseudonyms.

involvement. There were many other instances of parents participating in this school's processes, including the School Board, the Parent Teacher Organization, the Community Council (including parent representatives from all schools in the district), in some school committees such as the School Improvement and Grades 5-6 Program Planning committees, as well as individual parents working as volunteers in classrooms and other settings.

I observed parents involved in all these venues, but it was the Parent Council in which they truly engaged and attempted to influence efforts at school restructuring. Involvement in the other instances tended to be ritualistic and symbolic of diffuse, non-conflictive support of the school, although there were exceptions to this. Much of the effort was devoted to fund-raising to supplement the school's budget. The parents participating in Parent Council were often but by no means always supportive. Their words and actions often aimed at scrutinizing strengths and weaknesses, mapping short- and long-term goals, and influencing the school to change. The words and actions of these parents were based on reflection, conviction, and ideology--sometimes conflicting with one another, and often with the school staff.

Therefore, this is a case of parent involvement in a group whose identity and purpose centered around thinking about and assessing the school's program and activities, particularly related to restructuring. As both the principal and the parent

members often said, it was the school's "think tank," and there was a clear sense of differentiation from other parents' activities. This is not a case of involvement across a wide spectrum of roles and situations, as suggested by Epstein's typology outlined above; it sits squarely within her Type 5 category of involvement in school decision making, and within the democratic participation conceptions of Davies, Fine, and Sarason.

I now turn to a description of the school, its recent restructuring efforts, and to parent involvement in decision making activities.

Restructuring and the Parent Council in Yorkton M.S.

Yorkton Middle School (YMS) is the only middle school (grades 6 through 8) in Yorkton, a ethnically homogeneous and relatively affluent midwestern community of 25,000 in a rapidly growing area near the state capital. Five grade schools and a high school comprise the other buildings in the school district.

The middle school is large, with 1,340 students and 80 certified faculty and administrators. With the principal, Molly Kramer, and her superintendent, William Fiske, in their third years in these positions, the school has been involved in planning and implementing several restructuring moves. These include formation of interdisciplinary teams of teachers, each responsible for 110 students, and operating autonomously within a bell-free block schedule. During the 1993-94 year the school

staff "detracked" the curriculum (except in mathematics), eliminated their honors program, and moved to include most special needs students in regular classrooms. The principal formed a "Parent Council," a group of 13 parents to serve as "essential collaborators" in restructuring planning. In 1993-94, the school turned away from the previous three-year state funding of their restructuring, in part because of the actions of this parent group.

Yorkton Middle School was up until the 1993-94 school year a junior high, firmly committed to the curriculum and instruction practices of a mini-high school. The changes outlined above came about as the result of a four-year process launched by a confluence of events, some of them quite unpredictable. These centered around preparations for a joint North Central Association and state accreditation process conducted in the 1990-91 and 1991-92 school years.

Molly Kramer, (now principal but then an 8th grade science teacher), co-chaired the School Improvement Committee which was responsible for accreditation preparations. Working with a state university, the committee used in the spring of 1990 a school climate survey to assess student, teacher, and parent perceptions of the school. The committee, and the school staff as a whole, were shocked at the parent perceptions, sharply negative compared to those of students and teachers. Parents responded negatively to sets of questions regarding respect ("I feel welcome in this school"); communication ("Parents feel free to contact teachers

in this school"); leadership ("In this school I can participate in decisions that affect me"); instruction ("Teachers treat students in ways that emphasize success and potential in this school"); discipline ("This school is a safe place"); and physical facility (School property is respected at this school"). These troublesome survey data confirmed impressions of some of the school staff, as well as many parents. The School Improvement Committee and the school's administration realized that the information needed to be taken seriously, and the problems somehow addressed. Subsequent efforts aimed at school change stemmed partly from this reservoir of parental ill feelings toward the school.

At the same time these survey results were being discussed, in the spring of 1990, the school was awarded a grant of $10,000 as part of the state's Re:Learning school restructuring program, one affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. During the next two and a half years this funding, augmented by further state support of $25,000 as well as local district money, was used to support teachers' visiting a wide range of other schools in which restructuring was underway, as well as attending state and national conferences, workshops, and other in-service training sessions. The administrators made sure that each teacher, whether supportive or resistant to change, visited at least one school.

Molly Kramer was appointed assistant principal in the summer of 1990, and was a key leader in the planning process leading to

restructuring and adoption of a middle school orientation. She shepherded two faculty committees through the next two school years as they aimed for an interdisciplinary team teaching structure within a new block schedule that would help to break down the size and impersonality of the school. The faculty also planned for the detracking of the curriculum and the implementation of the state-mandated inclusion policy.

In January, 1992, the school was given a special status by the state department of instruction, as a "State 2000 School," designed to help schools in the restructuring process by permitting schools to ignore some state regulations if they conflicted with change efforts. For example, in 1993-94 the school faculty were involved with six more in-service half days than normally permitted by the state department of instruction. The activities on those days were connected with workshops on such topics as individualizing instruction, inclusion, and computer use. Part of the time was devoted to team planning and department communication. All focused on implementing school changes.

Molly Kramer was appointed principal of YJHS in the spring of 1992, after the district's business manager died suddenly, and Sam Nordeen, then principal of the junior high school, took that position. During the same time period, the long-term superintendent's successor, William Fiske, was appointed. This series of leadership changes came at a particularly important time with respect to the school's gathering momentum for

restructuring.

During Molly's first year as principal she and her staff laid the final groundwork for the actual changes implemented in the subsequent 1993-94 school year--interdisciplinary team teaming, detracking, and inclusion of special needs students. One of the moves she made was to form the Parent Council, partly because of the expectations set forth in the "Nine Common Principles" of the Coalition for Essential Schools, partly because the state required some form of "site-based council," and partly from concern over the negative perceptions of the school by many parents revealed in the 1990 survey. The work of this Parent Council was not all smooth through its first year of existence.

There was substantial debate within the group, and in the community at large, about the changes being planned in Yorkton Junior High. There was a particularly passionate outcry by a "gifted parents"[2] element about the planned elimination of the honors program and tracking generally. Many public meetings were held to discuss this and other proposed changes. During the February, 1993 the Parent Council wrote a formal "vision statement" in which they supported the directions being taken by the school staff. Agreement on this statement was substantial but not unanimous, and members from the group report sharp conflict. Echoes from that dissention reverberated in subsequent

[2]The term "gifted parents" was a somewhat derisive term invented by teacher and parent proponents of the elimination of honors and tracking.

years' meetings of the Parent Council.

The 1993-94 school year ushered in formal acknowledgment that the school had become a middle school. Its name was changed at the same time the staff instituted a new block schedule, interdisciplinary teacher teams, elimination of the honors program, and inclusion of most special needs students. While still bursting at its seams (the building by now needed nine portable classrooms to accommodate its more than 1,300 students and nearly 100 total staff), the school became smaller psychologically to the teachers and students; teams rather than grade levels or academic departments became their primary reference points. Teams operated somewhat autonomously within the block schedule, and adopted their own rules and activities. While not all teachers or students endorsed the changes wholeheartedly, there was general excitement and energy put into making the new arrangements work.

Some members of the Parent Council opposed the changes, although the majority supported them. During the 1993-94 year, meetings of the group continued to reflect deep divisions among parents about the nature, intents, and wisdom of detracking, teaming, and the middle school philosophy represented in the Coalition's Nine Common Principles. A vocal faction of the group lobbied hard to reverse these directions, bringing in a plethora of anti-change arguments, anecdotes, and materials; much of this seemed to stem from the literature from a confederation of politically conservative organizations, with attacks centering on

what were often labelled as attempts by schools to build "outcomes-based education."

The influence of these Parent Council dissenters was felt in several specific ways throughout 1993-94 and into the present year. One important decision they helped to bring to a head was to withdraw from affiliation with the Coalition of Essential Schools, and not to seek continued restructuring funding from the state department of instruction. Parent Council dissenters argued that by following the state department restructuring planners and the Coalition's leadership, the school was abdicating local control over education. Control over schools was the community's prerogative, they argued, and not that of the state or federal government, about whose motives they were deeply skeptical. These arguments and actions by some individuals in the Parent Council were not the only factor in the administration's decision to reverse their course, but they were important; had they not surfaced, the school might well still be receiving state restructuring support and be affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Another noteworthy activity, stretching beyond the 1993-94 year, was conduct of another survey of students, parents, and teachers about the school, using a different set of questions than the 1990 questionnaire, but aimed once again at obtaining perceptions and reactions about the school, especially about ways in which it had changed in the ensuing for years. The Parent Council worked in parallel, but never together, with the faculty

School Improvement Committee to create the questionnaire, and this turned out to take about half the year. There was much give and take on what were appropriate questions and response scales. During the spring, after questionnaires were returned to the school, there was much conflict over who could and how to handle the responses, especially the open-ended comments from parents and students. Parent Council members wanted to read all of them; the school staff decided that individual teachers' identities had to be expurgated before these comments could be made public. For a number of reasons, the process of survey tabulation was very drawn-out, and the final results were not published until nearly a year after the questionnaires were distributed. Parent Council meetings saw several episodes of blaming the teachers and administrators for delaying and censoring the survey results, and there was conflict over who "owned" the data.

The 1994-95 school year has seen consolidation of teaming and other changes. The survey results are now[3] public, and seem to show evaporation of some of the parents' bad feelings about Yorkton Middle School. Molly Kramer's overall interpretation of the survey results in the school newsletter stated that "...respondents perceived the overall program at Yorkton Middle School as being in the range of very good to satisfactory." She based this on mean responses across categories of items on such general categories as "communications, instruction, curriculum, social needs, discipline, school climate, and teaming. Using

[3]As of January, 1995.

response scales of "excellent" as 1, "very good" as 2, "satisfactory" as 3, and "needs improvement" as 4, the means range from teachers' rating teaming as 2.13 (most favorable) to teachers' rating of discipline as 3.20 (least favorable.) Most means were in the range of 2.50 to 2.90, which supports the principal's interpretation. With two exceptions, parent responses were more negative than teachers and students, mirroring the pattern in the 1990 survey, although differences across the three respondent groups were not large. Parents' most positive ratings related to the school meeting physical developmental needs of students (2.58); their most negative was of communications (2.91). Although the 1994 and 1990 survey results cannot be compared directly, it does appear that parents' perceptions of the school are more positive in the recent survey, although parents are still more negative than teachers and students.

The last major activity of the Parent Council during this study was to create a "vision statement" which focussed broadly on what parents wanted the school to be in the long-term future. The preamble of this vision statement opened with this:

> We asked ourselves: What should YMS look like in ten years? What should people be doing? What and how should kids be learning? When students leave this building as 8th graders, what do we want them to take? What do we as parents want to contribute to the ideal we are seeking?

During October, 1993, Molly had tried to engaged the parents in what she referred to as "visioning"--systematic discussion of the relevance and desirability for YMS of the Coalition of Essential

Schools' Nine Common Principles. These discussions quickly turned into occasions for sharp criticism of the restructuring moves, however, and eventually were sidetracked by work on the survey instrument. In February, 1994, Molly asked the group to write a formal vision statement, perhaps hoping to refocus the group's attention away from the earlier criticism. When asked by a parent what the purpose of the statement was to be, Molly answered: "...it will give me something to refer to, and something to show others who visit the school. It will be part of what goes on here at TMS. Ultimately, it will help make decisions around here" (PCFN 2-7-94, p. 6). Much of the Council's efforts from then until January, 1995, was devoted to drafting, revising, and debating about how to disseminate this vision statement.

During the 1994-95 year, Molly Kramer attempted to integrate people from Parent Council into some standing faculty committees, including the School Improvement Committee (parents worked with faculty on classifying and tabulating parents' and students' openended survey comments for the final report), and the Talent Committee, which worked on developing "talent areas" the school currently has programs for, or should build in the future. More in keeping with the school's interpretation of the middle school orientation, developing talent in many forms has become a substitute goal for fostering academic giftedness alone through honors programs and ability grouping.

The period between 1990, with its self-study and other

preparations for state and North Central accreditations, and the beginning of the 1993-94 school year, is called "The Slow Melt" by Molly Kramer.[4] If that period was a slow melt, the 1993-95 period seemed to be a full-fledged spring thaw. Much activity was devoted to implementing changes, questioning them, and conflict over goals and tactics. The Parent Council was an important part of this process.

Themes and Interpretation

I now turn from this narrative to an analysis and interpretation of issues and themes relating to parent involvement in Yorkton Middle School I encountered during the 1993-94 and 1994-95 school years. The framework for this interpretation is the argument that the rhetoric of parents as collaborators is in conflict with the reality of educators' attempts to maintain boundaries between their professional domain and parents' involvement. I will show with the case study of the Yorkton Middle School Parent Council how this conflict is manifested in three different ways: in very different conceptions of goals for parents' actions; in struggles for control; and in lack of trust on both sides.

---

[4]Molly coined the phrase in a graduate class paper in June of 1993, "How Did We Get Here?", in which she chronicled some of the events I have described here. (I was not involved in that class.) I have used material from this paper and a number of other documents, as well as fieldnotes and interview transcripts, in constructing this narrative. The interpretations are mine, not Molly's.

The Argument: Collaboration versus Boundary Maintenance

As I have shown in the introduction there are different interpretations of the meaning of "parental involvement." The supportive, achievement gain orientation contrasts with the view that parents should be directly involved in decisions about important school issues. "Collaboration" has quite different meanings depending on which of these viewpoints is taken.

Fine (1993 p. 695) casts this distinction as a "democracy of differences" reflecting the politics of power in parent involvement. She explains two stances parents take regarding their roles on Philadelphia school governance councils, one of "...those that maintain a parents' rights perspective...an oppositional, non-trusting, adversarial relation with the school district." Others "... try to work collaboratively with educators toward a collective vision of school community."

Whenever parents inject themselves into the processes of schooling questions must arise about how much say they will have, and in what arenas this influence will be welcome by educators. In the present case there were boundaries between parents and educators that were constantly invoked and commented upon.

During a Parent Council meeting when Molly Kramer was not present, the parents were discussing teachers' reactions to the summary statement of their Vision Statement as it was discussed during a recent meeting of the teacher and parent "Talent Committee." As they talked about teachers' negative reactions to the parents' statement, and their acceptance and resistance to

change in general, Pat Smith, a former teacher herself, commented that "...they [school administrators] want parents to help [lead teachers to change] but there's a line we can't cross" [PCFN 1-25-95, 11]. The "line" she referred to was almost always evident in one way or another in my observations and interviews, and in the context of parent involvement maintaining this boundary between parents and professional educators consumed much energy and led to miscommunication, mistrust, and conflict.

Sarason contends that preserving these boundaries leads to conflicts. This is how Sarason (1995) characterizes the "line":

> However you define a professional, that person's training makes clears that there are boundaries of responsibility into which "outsiders" should not be permitted to intrude. These boundaries are intended to define and protect the power, authority, and decision making derived from formal training and experience. (23)

Sarason's argues that the maintenance of these professional boundaries conflicts directly with his "political principle," the implication of which is that parents must be permitted a full hearing in the decision making about what happens in schools.

The confluence of the rhetoric about parent collaboration and the reality of boundary maintenance by professional educators provides a stage for three constant themes found in the present case--conflict over goals of parents' actions; struggles for control; and erosion of trust.

Conflict Over Goals and Meaning of Parent Involvement

There was a wide range of ideas regarding the proper goals of the Parent Council. Not only were there differences between

the principal and some parents, but also among parents themselves. These differences were most often argued openly and respectfully, but at times the discourse became heated and contentious.

Molly Kramer viewed the Parent Council's purposes as including a support group for restructuring efforts, a sounding board for her's and others' ideas regarding school programs, a communications link to the community at large, and as a source of ideas about long-term goals for the school--the school's "think tank." For Molly, the group also represented a required response to expectations by external agencies such as the state department of education and the Coalition of Essential Schools that such a group exist.

Both Molly and Jim Larson, Director of Secondary Education, saw the group as a key participant in the decision to eliminate honors classes and tracking made during the winter of 1993. After nine public hearings on the issue earlier that year, the Parent Council had written a strong endorsement of these moves, and both Molly and Jim saw this as a critical step in the restructuring process. Molly wrote of their plan

> ...to detrack our school for next year [1994-95], and we hadn't planned to deal with that issue for another year. Some parents forced us to bring that issue to the table now [winter of 1993], however, and so we did. It was the thought among [teacher] team leaders that we involved the community unlike we had never [sic] done before...We had never included parents in a meaningful way previously (Kramer 1993, p. 7).

Jim Larson talked in an interview about deflecting parent criticism of the detracking decision and other restructuring

moves made by the school. He said that the school's administrators need to challenge the parent critics:

> ...we need to always go back and say, 'now there was a group that had a big part in that decision making'; they need to share some of that responsibility, too, and we can't let them slide out (JLIN 6-1-94, p. 26).

It seems clear that both Molly and Jim saw the influence of parents in the detracking decision as positive. When the same group of parents turned to intense criticism of this decision during the following year, however, they were distressed. I asked Jim Kramer, in light of the 1993-94 criticisms from the Parent Council, whether it was still a valuable group, said:

> Oh, I think it's been...it has been a crucial group in the fact that if we had not involved parents I'm sure they [YMS] would never have gotten to where they are at today. Uh, I think definitely there has to be some rethinking about how that group functions. I still think...that even though the group of decision makers are expanding they're still closed [unrepresentative] groups. You know when you are only taking two from each [elementary] school.... (JKIN 6-1-94, p. 28)

I concluded that Jim, and perhaps Molly, believed that direct parent involvement in decision making was good as long as parents supported administrators' actions and goals. When opposition became evident, though, Jim wanted to "rethink" the representativeness of the Parent Council, meaning its source of legitimacy and power.

Among the parents there were three distinct views about the purposes and goals of the Parent Council, and parent involvement in general. The "Old Time Supporters" were a group that had belonged to the group from the beginning--for most of three years--and who had supported restructuring moves across the

board. These parents were in the majority when the detracking decision was made during the winter of 1993, and when they saw this come under sharp attack during the following school year they deplored the "negativism" of the critics. Their unhappiness came to a head in early March, 1994, after several months of meetings in which the parent critics constantly attacked restructuring and the actions of the principal, several of the Old Time Supporters banded together and gave what amounted to a verbal tongue-lashing to the critics. Their notion of parent involvement goals as solid support of school personnel and programs, shorn of any negativism and conflict, was made clear in this meeting, and in subsequent interviews. They believed there had been great progress made during the previous year, and now the critics had brought in an outside agenda, an anti-OBE agenda, and had spread negativism throughout the school. Anne Clark, one of the Old-Time Supporters, explains in an extended interview excerpt:

> ...the problem was three little letters and that was OBE. Had those letters not come into Parent Council we would still be moving along the way we were before, which was trying to take this new concept and build it into a real good learning environment. But the term OBE was introduced.... When that came in and certain people in the Parent Council began bringing in all the information they could find, it was almost all negative, it was all the fear stuff, that's what happened.
>
> Now, see what that does is, it takes away from the trust. Because last year what we were trying to do was to build trust. Molly came in every Monday for quite some time; she would tell us what we could do with the school and her ideas; she asked us for our visions.... And so we worked hard, I mean we worked awful hard last year and we just got excited about it....

> And I'm not saying that we resolved all the issues because we had to sometimes agree to disagree and go on but we had a feeling that we were really accomplishing something for our school. It was something that was coming from our school, from our people. This year when we came in, all of the sudden there was this big picture of maybe this wasn't just our school but maybe this was the national school and maybe we hadn't been told everything. And we worked all year [1992-93] trying to bring trust and trying to bring the parents in, bring us your concerns, let's build something that you want and trust us, we'll have communication and we'll build trust and I had no trouble with trust because my little girl was having so many problems I was with everybody and I could see that they were trustworthy. But when that came in and we had a whole bunch of new Parent Council members that hadn't been benefitted from this last year and all they heard was the 'don't trust'. This is the problem and it's us against them and this sort of thing began. That's what happened. (ACIN, 3-7-94, pp. 18-19)

The "Critics" were a vocal minority who had seen their children's honors classes done away with at the start of the school year. They had their hearing during the previous year and had lost the argument, but they were not done giving voice to their criticism of that decision, and of other school practices, programs, and directions. As Anne Clark pointed out in the interview excerpt above, the Critics injected a new and generally unwelcome element into the Parent Council discourse--politically and religiously right wing arguments in favor of local control of schools, and against many things. Among these were anything they might associate with OBE; any practices that stood the school in place of parenting; programs aimed at promoting "non-academic" outcomes like self-concept, attitudes and values, and sex education; and, of course, state and federal regulation and control of the curriculum and schooling. Anne Clark was wrong about one factual point, however--the Critics were not new to the

group. They had participated during the first year's deliberations about detracking just as she had, but they disagreed with her.

For the Critics the goal of parent involvement was in bring influence to bear on anything they viewed as wrong, and help ferret those things out of the school. They focussed nearly all of their positive efforts at trying to get the school to upgrade the academic content of schooling; there was hardly a meeting without pointed accusations about the school's "dumbing down the curriculum" resulting from elimination of honors classes and detracking, and from implementing some of the Coalition of Essential Schools Nine Common Principles (the slogan seen posted in some teachers' rooms--"less is more"--was one of their favorite targets). Shirley Lutz, one of the Critics, joined the Parent Council in order to communicate this concern and to inform other parents as well as school staff about the need for emphasis on academics:

> I was very much concerned about the elimination of the honor's classes--I had been very supportive of gifted education. I'm a member of the Association for the Gifted, I've gone to several of their conventions, I really understand, the needs of gifted children and I just really wanted to make sure those needs were being met. Here in Yorkton, for the Yorkton kids and my son, (my daughter hasn't been in the honor's program) I wanted to make sure his needs were met and so last year there was a notice in a newsletter here that parents who wanted to be involved as a Parent Council member could come and so I, you know, I asked Molly if I could be a member of Parent/Partners. But my focus was at that time I had a lot of resources about gifted education and I felt like I needed to give people the research, so they could make decisions for these kids; so they could be knowledgeable about what gifted students need...I was on a mission, you know. I'm kind of a driven person. I wanted to get the research, give it to the people

> who I felt might [be] the decision makers in the process. (SLIN 4-13-94, p. 3)

Shirley thought that by bringing information to the process she would serve as a missionary, influencing decisions important to her and her children. She didn't share the administrators' or the Old Time Supporters' beliefs that the parent Council had been influential in the previous year's decision to detrack, asserting instead that the group had acted in a "rubber stamp" role for a predetermined plan of the administration.

She returned to the Parent Council during the 1993-94 year asking herself: "...why do they want to dumb down their school?. That question kept going over and over in my head." (SLIN 4-23-94, p. 10) She asked the question in many forms throughout the 1993-94 year, playing her informing, missionary role to the hilt.

She also spearheaded the anti-government intrusion and anti-OBE criticism in the group, bringing to meetings newspaper clippings, as well as brochures, videotapes, and other documents from national right-wing groups and from the state's Family Fellowship. Before the 1993-94 school year, she explained,

> "...I was basically in the dark about school reform. Even though I had gone to the conventions it wasn't really, really, I didn't really know about it. I never heard of the word outcome based education or if I did it didn't mean anything to me; restructuring didn't mean that much to me. I didn't really realize the full impact of what our nation is going through until probably I started finding more about it this summer and then doing a lot of research, making a lot of phone calls, making a lot of contacts trying to find out myself what it all means. (SLIN, 4-13-94, p. 5)

Shirley also sees communication as a goal of parent involvement. She believed that as a result of her's and others'

actions, communication between parents and school staff had improved, there were many more parents in the building than ever before, and they felt much more welcome than in previous years:

> Oh it's been a big turn around in that respect and I really think parents have made things a lot better in the way of communicating - it was so messed up, you know, communication was just not there. (SLIN, 4-13-94, p. 12)

She also contended that the goal of parents' influencing decision making had been fostered during the 1993-94 year. Rather than viewing her's and the other Critics efforts as being negativistic, as the Old Timer Supporters did, Shirley contended that the Parent Council is not so much a rubber stamp group this year:

> I really see that as a healthy sign especially you know we were, you know, at the end of the year here we're [referring to the Parent Council] starting to meet all the time by ourself and at least half the meeting I really feel like that gives us some credibility that we really are a group of decision makers and we are trying to, even though sometimes I feel like you know, we're really kind of I don't know. A lot of times I've come - it's like do I have to go to this meeting, you know, it's like can I just run away I don't want to be involved any more. But uh, I really walked out of the meetings with a lot of frustration at times but other times I feel like there's been a lot of hope and a lot of positive things that have come out where people really are getting informed. I guess that's kind of my mission now is to make sure people are informed and what does the state government want us to do, what does the federal government want us to do. So I feel like now my mission is trying to keep these people informed, you know, what's going on in the world around us and how that's going to affect us is we're really going to think well we're protected in our own little town here in Yorkton and I really wish we were but uh, I don't think that's true at all, that we are. (SLIN, 4-13-94, p. 12)

The Critics' goals center around influencing school decisions through information-giving and they do not shrink from dissent and confrontation.

I've labelled a third group in the Parent Council the "Newcomers." These are members who joined the Council after its first year, in which it supported the detracking and other restructuring decisions. Some were new in the 1993-94 year, and others joined during the present 1994-95 year. Because they did not share the experiences of either the Old Time Supporters or the Critics, their perspectives toward the group were different. Their views about the goals of parent involvement were not as easy to categorize, but they fell more on the side of the Critics. They expressed impatience with the drawn-out processes of creating and working on the results of the school survey, and the vision statement. They tended to see these as activities as unfocussed and dictated by Molly Kramer, the principal, and not central to what they saw as important, which was helping to manage the school. They wanted "hands-on involvement" in the life of the school, and were determined to initiate programmatic ideas and take a more active role in problem-solving. They rejected the "sounding board" and "think tank" functions articulated by Molly and the Old Time Supporters. One of these Newcomers, Susan Taft, serving as interim chairperson of the Council for a couple of months, reflected this impatience to me when she called and asked me to provide the names of other middle schools in the area who had effective parent groups, so the Yorkton parents could visit them and adopt new approaches to energize them. She told me of a Parent Council meeting (at which I was not present) in which Molly had rejected more activist

directions being proposed by the group. They told Molly they wanted more focus and more hands-on involvement in the school; Molly responded that that's not what she saw as the group's goal; to her they were a sounding board. (I interpreted that as Molly's attempt to maintain control and boundaries.) Susan reported to me that there was a lot of tension over the group's goals, both between Molly and parents, and between the Old Time Supporters and the Newcomers.

Pervading the discourse about parent involvement was disagreement over whether personal, individual objectives or commonly held objectives should be pursued. This relates to the distinction between private versus public interests noted by Fine in her analysis of her Philadelphia case (1993, pp. 694, 697). She observes that there the parents were urged to subdue their private interests, because they would interfere with achieving "the emergence of the common good." She argues that "If parents' interests are shaped as private, and schools' interests as 'public,' then a conversation toward a common vision is nearly impossible" (p. 697).

Parents in the present case argued between themselves about whether they should be participating in the Parent Council with the immediate interests of their own children foremost in their minds (a position forcefully typified by Shirley Lutz and her passion to reinstitute honors classes for her "gifted" son,) or whether they should eschew these personal considerations in favor of the broader, longer-range interests of the many. This view

was represented by several on the Council, with Jeanette Rankin one of those constantly reminding other members that they needed to set aside their goals of hands-on involvement and working for short-range changes which would help their own children in the school, and focus on the future good of all the students.

This was one reason work on the vision statement was valued highly by some, and rejected by others as meaningless. During a meeting in which they discussed the purpose of the vision statement, Pat Smith urged the group to drop the entire idea, arguing that it wouldn't lead anywhere. Instead, she said, they should work on specific concerns that could be changed, that they could act on then, and that would affect their own kids. Jeanette Rankin, chairing the meeting, disagreed strongly, contending that on the Council they had to take a more detached, broad view. There was support for both positions. Mary Singleton, another Critic, chimed in: "Do we want to be a general group, or one with specific concerns? I don't want to spend all our time on high principles. The year could be over by the time we do anything." Peggy Cox retorted that there was an emotional side and an objective side of this argument, and they needed to work on the objective side [long-term, broad concerns] (PCFN, 2-14-94, pp. 8-9).

There was so much disagreement on this point (in this and in previous meetings) that the group decided to split their meetings into two parts, one hour devoted to specific "concerns", and the other to vision planning. They asked Molly Kramer to join them

for the former, and to leave during the latter, as they felt the vision statement should be theirs without her input.

In her role as principal, Molly's concern with the Parent Council's goals was not so much with the pursuit of public versus private interests as it was with control--maintaining boundaries around parent interests of both kinds. I now turn to this overarching issue.

Patrolling the Boundaries

The school administrators in this case championed the collaborative role of parents. Yet there were definite limits to their collaborative actions, "lines" they didn't want parents to cross. For Sarason, this harkens back to professionalism and the training of professionals to believe they possess special training and experience from which they derive power, authority, and decision making in their sphere, in this case schooling, and part of their job as professionals is to maintain the boundaries between "outsiders" and professionals (1995, p. 23). Do school teachers and administrators believe parents should be heard? Yes, Sarason explains:

> ...educators had always recognized that parents have a legitimate vested interest in what happens to their children in school, but that did not mean to educators that that interest should be formally accompanied by the power to influence how schools and classrooms are structured and run, the choice of curriculum, selection of teachers and other personnel, and so forth. These matters were off-limits; they were the concern and responsibility of the professional educators (p. 20).

Parents should have voice, but not decision making power, and

maintaining that distinction constituted part of the boundary maintenance tasks facing Molly Kramer in her difficult principal's role.

One way in which parents on the Council gave voice to their interests was in bringing "concerns" to Molly during each meeting. Members felt part of their role was to represent parents' grievances they'd heard in conversation with people outside the Parent Council group, and sometimes they blended in their own "concerns" as well. Concerns ranged from minute details about Student Council election processes to wide-reaching criticism of fundamental curriculum issues, the primary one being whether the school was embracing principles and strategies of outcomes-based education. "Concerns time" took on a life of its own during Council meetings, and Molly finally asked that it be formalized to the extent that the concerns be written and presented to her in advance of the meetings so that she would have enough time and information to respond without being "jumped" with events and data she hadn't known about. Parents developed a form for this, although they did not always observe Molly's request for advance notice.

These "personal" interests had limits, however. Molly was careful in insisting that parents with grievances about a particular teacher, or team of teachers, deal directly with that teacher or team, and not try to pass problems directly to her or her assistants, bypassing the teachers. Further, individual teachers were not named in concerns. This seemed important in

protecting her authority as supervisor of her staff.

Preservation of teacher anonymity also became a major issue when the school survey was conducted during the spring, 1994. Parents on the Council had participated fully in creating and editing the questions and response scales for all three questionnaires--for teachers, students, and parents. They had been alerted during the process that they would be asked to tabulate the responses to open-ended questions, and they looked forward anxiously to this, believing they would be able to help interpret important data regarding the success of the first year's institution of the middle school concepts and other restructuring moves like teaming and detracking.

The response to the survey was very high: 90% of teachers, 73% of parents, and 84% of students returned questionnaires. But there was an immediate problem. Some teachers, contrary to instructions, had read parent and student questionnaires returned in to the teachers in their classrooms, and several were alarmed about negative comments made by parents about their teaching performance, and about teaming, detracking, and so forth. Some parents had named specific teachers in their negative comments. A quiet uproar engulfed the school, upsetting the principal as well as the teachers. Molly was faced with a dilemma, now that some of her teachers had betrayed the anonymity pledge of the survey, because it became clear that these same teachers, and perhaps others, did not trust the Parent Council to read the comments that they themselves had found repugnant, especially

comments with teachers and teams named in them. Should the parents have access to these comments, they would cross a boundary into territory reserved for school administrators, the only persons sanctioned to see complaints about teachers.

The problem was solved by having the School Improvement Committee obliterate the names of specific teachers and teams written on the surveys. However, this took a long time--several weeks--adding to the delay in analyzing the results, and keeping the information away from parents much longer than they wanted. The actual categorization and tabulation of open-ended responses of parents and students was not completed until the fall of 1994, six months after the surveys were returned.

In the spring of 1994 the Critics on the Council made a concerted attempt to gain access to the parent surveys and use them in their own evaluation. They proposed that they take them home to work on them. Molly was adamant that the surveys stay in her custody, and that only in closely monitored situations would they be used. There was intense conflict between Molly and the Critics over this boundary maintenance issue, lasting well into the summer after school ended.

There were occasions in which the principal seemed to throw herself on the boundary between the territory of parents and that of teachers in order to keep them separate. No better example exists than that of the sharing with teachers of the long-awaited vision statement created by the Parent Council. The parents worked on this from February through December of 1994, and it

turned out to have some controversial parts. One was the call for an individualized educational plan (termed the "Personal Learning Plan" in the vision statement) for every student in the school, created by the student, teachers, and parents, assessed twice a year. Much more troubling to Molly was the last item in the section on professional staff: "We see that tenure sometimes promotes job security at the expense of quality teaching." She felt that teachers would reject the Personal Learning Plan as an inappropriate intrusion on their professional competence to determine the curriculum and programs of the school, and unworkable as a practical matter. Regarding the anti-tenure statement, she believed that it would cause such a turmoil among teachers that they would be diverted from other, positive and important program planning work then underway, and would devote much time and energy in a negative way, engaged in conflict with the parents over this gratuitous statement in the vision statement. Clearly, the principal believed the parents were crossing the line into professional matters, and tried to dissuade the parents from including it.

While the parents were debating this issue, Molly chose to protect the boundary by working with Jeanette Rankin, outgoing chairperson of the Parent Council and the primary force behind completing the vision statement, in creating a scaled-down version of the vision statement to be shared with teachers. Together they chose only parts that they believed would inform teachers about parents' views about programming changes in the

school, including the Personal Learning Plan; the anti-tenure statement was excised. In the end, Molly was successful in getting the Parent Council to remove the latter from the full version of the vision statement.

Not only did Molly use her influence to have the "inflammatory" section on tenure removed, but throughout the episode she resisted parents' wishes to present and discuss the vision statement directly with teachers, and with the School Board. Molly retained tight control over the statement's distribution herself, thus keeping the teachers and parents at a distance from one another where they might come into conflict over controversial ideas and values.

A final example of boundary maintenance related to the curriculum, and involved parents' concerns about sex education. Over the entire 18 months of my field work in the school, the Parent Council meetings returned to this issue repeatedly. Several of the parents reflected their own and other parents' mistrust of the teachers in teaching their children about sexuality. They brought fears and stories to the meetings, and during the fall of 1993 Molly indicated the school would have a parent information night to discuss the sex education curriculum. (it was not until January of 1995 that this session was actually held.) The parents pressed Molly to show them curriculum guides, texts, and other materials used in the school for this subject, and she assured them they could as individuals view these materials in the school like any other curriculum materials. The

parents suggested having materials on display during the parent information night; the head of the health teachers told them this "wasn't practical." They wondered if they could attend classes in which sex education was the topic, and here Molly and the health teachers drew the line clearly: Parents could attend health classes in which the drug unit (another parent concern area) was being taught, but not sex education classes. The reason given was that parents would inhibit the students.

The parents accepted the boundaries set forth by Molly and the health teachers. Teachers could ask questions about the sex education curriculum, but their efforts at studying materials in their meetings, or having them available for general parental inspection in a public information session, met with resistance by the school staff. Nor were they welcome in actual classes, the preserve of the professional educators, the ones best qualified to teach sensitive topics such as human sexuality.

But accepting the curriculum line they couldn't cross didn't make the parents trust the teachers with sex education; they persisted with their questions and became impatient over the long delay in scheduling the parent information night, some wondering privately if they were being put off because there were things going on in these classes that were being deliberately hidden from their scrutiny.

This incident, together with the others outlined previously, suggest that when parents are invited to collaborate with educators their efforts are often subjected to close control in

order to protect professional boundaries. Pat Smith's idea that "...they want parents to help but there's a line we can't cross" encapsulates the point succinctly.

Mirrors of Mistrust

As the rhetoric of collaboration gives way to the reality of boundary control, trust is bound to be affected. Expressions of lack of trust popped out continuously from some the Parent Council members, with the notable exception of the Old Time Supporters.

In large measure, the parents very much trusted and respected Molly as an individual and person. Even the most persistent of the Critics made clear in an interview that Molly had made substantial positive changes in the climate and programs of the school since taking the principal's role. This general trust and liking was repeated over and over in parent interviews. They saw her as opening up the school to parents; Mary Singleton explains the change from the time before Molly was principal, when Mary felt she had:

> ...no access to, you know, teachers or to the administration there and I didn't like it at all. So Molly has, if you know [what I mean], one of the best things she's done is to open up this school to parents and make us feel...like we do have more input.... (MSIN, 3-28-94, pp. 18-19)

Nevertheless, this general trust and admiration of Molly contrasts with a fear that in some specific situations she had "used" the Parent Council to rubber stamp her own ideas and goals for school change. During parts of meetings when Molly was not

present it was not uncommon to hear some parents worry about whether they were "Molly's Little Yes Group," a charge made my some in the community, and accepted by the Critics and some other members as true. (To my knowledge, no Parent Council member ever used this phrase in Molly's presence.) The general trust and good feeling toward Molly was contradicted by the feeling of being manipulated by her in specific situations.

For example, Molly Kramer invited the collaboration of the parents in formulating the questionnaires for the survey. Originally, she wanted them to work only on the parent form; they quickly expanded their work to include the student form as well. Molly tried to keep the parents focussed on their own domain, but they broke out of that, playing a much more prominent role in the writing of the survey instruments than she initially envisioned. She wanted them involved, up to a point, but they ignored her efforts in this instance (PCFN, 11-22-94, p. 4).

Later, after the surveys were returned and the parents wanted to get their hands on them to evaluate the first year's restructuring efforts, Molly used her principal's authority to control carefully how many parents would have access (only those "trusted" by the teacher School Improvement Committee were included), and under what circumstances the access would take place (only after all teacher and team identities had been removed from open-ended comments, and only in the context of formal, in-school, meetings of the School Improvement Committee).

There was no doubt that this tight boundary control,

combined with the protracted delays in processing the surveys and getting a final report, led to feelings of mistrust on the part of some of the parents. The Critics, especially, wanted open access and ability to form their own interpretations and judgments; they did not trust Molly and the teachers with the data and with forming their own conclusions. During the late spring and early summer of 1994, this became a source of extreme conflict between those parents and Molly, and between groups in the Parent Council as a whole. The conflict was never actually resolved; the most vehement of the Critics left the Council that summer never having seen the surveys nor having more reason to trust the educators or, for that matter, their parent colleagues.

Another example of parents' mistrust stood out during the December 15, 1994 meeting of the group. Immediately after they finally voted to remove the anti-tenure sentence from their vision statement, the very next issue they brought up was "trust." Was there "trust" written into the document, they asked themselves? Having attacked one symbol of professional boundaries, teacher tenure, and then retreated, they signalled their concern for trust.

They searched through the five-page vision statement for what seemed the hundredth time, and assured themselves that yes, trust was explicitly embedded in the statement in several places. My own reading finds only one instance; in the section on "Communication and Involvement," they write: "We see frequent parent/student/teacher conferences with free discussion and a

real feeling of trust and cooperation."

Given the very negative evaluation by the Parent Council of the two sets of parent-teacher conferences conducted while I was in the school, I interpreted this statement as an clear message of distrust. They wrote it in the vision statement precisely because they do not trust the school staff to provide for conferences marked by free discussion and feelings of trust and cooperation. The reasons for their mistrust seemed evident during post mortem discussions of parent-teacher conferences--they were too short and sometimes not private, teachers were not always well-prepared, and often refused to engage in in-depth discussion of parents' concerns about their children. The parents saw the teachers and principal as trying to keep tight control of these conferences--trying to maintain the boundaries between educators and parents in a setting where the borders might easily be breached. In the vision statement parents called for a school in which they exercised equal power while participating in conferences; in actual practice the educators acted to preserve their superior power as professionals.

Beyond Boundary Maintenance

I have depicted parent involvement in this case within a particular interpretive framework, one that reveals contradictions. In many ways the rhetoric of parent involvement as collaboration is not matched by the reality of control and maintenance of professional power, and this mismatch leads to

conflict and mistrust by parents.

The material I selected from the case fits this interpretation, and serves the purposes of my argument well. However, the evidence I used constitutes only a fraction of the total available. I believe my portrayal a fair one, given my analysis of recurring themes and patterns of events in the case.

But there could be alternative pictures created from the data. By no means were all of Molly Kramer's, or other administrators or teachers, actions aimed at boundary maintenance, nor were the parents uniformly distrustful of her and others' actions. I have referred earlier to the general support and trust of Molly by the Parent Council.

Nor were parents always kept out of decision making. When the state department of education called for proposals for additional restructuring support grants in the fall of 1994, the criteria for judging them hinged partly on schools' acceptance and incorporation of the Coalition of Essential Schools Nine Common Principles, then under close scrutiny and sharp attack by several on the Parent Council. Most of the parents agreed that accepting the state restructuring funds under this condition would be a serious capitulation by the school to outside influences that did not fit their conception of valuable school ideals and programs.

Molly invited all parents on the Council to attend the state's briefing meeting on the RFP, and several attended, so that YMS was the only school of the approximately 30 represented

which had parents involved. Following the meeting, the parents reached consensus that they would argue forcefully with Molly and the district's central administrators not to apply for the grant. They did not have to make their arguments in a formal meeting; Molly and the central office administrators, sensing the determined mood of the group in advance, came to the next Council meeting and preempted the parents by announcing they realized there were unacceptable strings attached to the grants, and they would not apply, preferring to remain in control of the values and programs at the local level. This action essentially untied the links to the Coalition of Essential Schools, carefully built by Molly and Jim Larson over a three-year period. In this case they heard the parents' views informally, and decided that the parents' power was sufficient to make a grant application very difficult. Even though the administrators badly wanted the money to support further restructuring efforts (the grants were for technology and restructuring), and even though Molly was committed to implementing several of the Nine Common Principles, the parents' influence was decisive in blocking the application.

The parents were relieved they didn't have to face down the administration in a formal conflict over the issue, and felt a sense of power about having their influence count in an important decision. I heard no comments about "Molly's Little Yes Group" relating to that event!

I conclude with this anecdote partly to show that not all parent participation in Yorkton Middle School was kept outside

educator-constructed boundaries; on the contrary, Molly invited them to cross the line and become directly involved in this instance. Yet it was an exception. Mostly, parents worked in support roles, and were fenced off from school decision making protected by the professionals.

Exceptional it might have been. But it does point the way to the possibility of meaningful participation by parents who, as Sarason points out, have the ultimate stake in the education process. While there is much boundary maintenance and distrust at Yorkton Middle School, there is slow change and cause for hope among those calling for democratic participation by parents as equals in school decision making. The rhetoric can be joined to reality.

List of References

Coalition of Essential Schools (1993). The Coalition of Essential Schools (information booklet). Providence, RI: Brown University.

Davies, D. (1981). Communities and their schools. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Davies, D. (1987). Parent involvement in the public schools: Opportunities for administrators. Education and Urban Society, 19(2), 147-163.

Epstein, J. (1993). Response to Michelle Fine. Teachers College Record, 94(4), 710-717.

Fine, M. (1993). [Ap]parent involvement: Reflections on parents, power, and urban public schools. Teachers College Record, 94(4), 682-710.

Kramer, M. (1993). How did we get here? Unpublished paper for a graduate class.

Sarason, S. (1995). Parental Involvement and the Political Principle: Why the Existing Governance structure of Schools Should be Abolished. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wolcott, H. (1988). "Ethnographic research in education." In Jaeger, R. ed., (1988). Complementary Methods for research in education. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, (1989). Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century. Washington, DC: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.